

Written by Aki Morimoto
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LIKE A LOVE ♡ COMEDY ♡

ラブコメディのように

June

Yaoi



Novel

VISIT...

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"Hi there, Biwa. Good morning." Walking in the front door, his colleague Brenda stopped and gave him a long look. "So, what's with the suit?" "My first day on the production team." "That's right. Well it stands to reason." "Stands to reason?" Did she mean because the episode he wrote got such good ratings? "Oh, you haven't heard?" said Brenda, a surprised look on her face. "The upcoming series—"

All his life, Biwa dreamed of working behind the scenes at a major American television studio. Three years after getting hired on as a fledging screenwriter, he finally gets his chance when a series production team gives him a call.

Waiting for the first meeting of his new team, Biwa has a run-in with Toyohira Yamato, a Japanese actor he's never met and whose bad attitude spoils Biwa's day. What's worse, it turns out that Biwa's "big break" is going to be babysitting Toyohira, Japan's top actor and the star of a new series!

Biwa can't tell which will drive him crazy first: watching his dreams circle the drain, or dealing with Toyohira's impertinent attitude.



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"Do you hate me?"

"I love you, of course."

"As long as you love me, then nothing else in this world matters!"

Biwa felt his chest burn. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*
He loved Yamato from the bottom of his heart.

PROFILE

STORY

Aki Morimoto

Birthday: September 26th

Blood Type: O

I bought a new computer! It has an HD-ready monitor, as well. I only have one television cable, so I haven't hooked it up. Does that say something about me?

ILLUSTRATION

Yutta Narumi

Birthday: February 1st

Blood Type: A

While doing the color illustrations, my airbrush broke and I totally wigged out.

LIKE A LOVE COMEDY

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Foreword

You haven't suffered a day in your life. So, why are you standing there acting like it's no big deal? I'm not jealous or anything. I made it this far on my own merits. But I can't help how frustrated I feel. That's why I hate you. I really hate you!

Chapter 1

“All right, then.”

Biwa Uno checked himself in the mirror and nodded. Starting today, he'd finally be a member of the team. Naturally, he was all fired up and ready to go.

Biwa put on his jacket as he left the apartment. Here in Los Angeles, he didn't have to worry about rain or snow; the temperature averaged in the high seventies all year round. Still, through fall and into winter he'd feel the cold if he didn't wear an extra layer. Just because this was a warm climate didn't mean the season didn't change.

He got into his car and started the engine. Whistling to himself, he stepped on the accelerator. His destination was the television production company.

Yes, today Biwa's life as a television screenwriter would begin. *It's been a long time coming*, he told himself with a happy sigh as he drove down the L.A. boulevards.

Back when he was a second-grader, his father's job took the family from Japan to Ohio. At first, Biwa hated everything about it. He had no friends and couldn't speak English. All he did was go to school and sit there at his desk like a lump.

He came home after school every day ready

to burst into tears. "He can't even speak English!" his classmates taunted him (or, at least, that's what he imagined they were saying; it wasn't like he could understand them). But breaking down in front of them would be too mortifying, so he sucked it up until he got home.

Then the floodgates would open.

"I want to go back to Japan," he'd bawl.

His mother would look at him with concern and sympathy. "I'm sorry," she'd say, "but we can't."

After a year of trials and tribulations, he had mastered English. After that, making friends wasn't a problem, and school even became enjoyable. He could clearly remember how overjoyed his mother was, the first time he invited his friends over to play.

And so was he. Although he knew no English and was still a kid, his parents had enrolled him in a local public school. Biwa was the only Japanese student there, and no one could give him a leg up. Because he was a single child, the only people he could talk to were his parents.

Now and then, they let on how badly they felt for him and what a strain the whole thing must be. How they should have transferred to a more metropolitan locale and settled down in a Japanese community.

At this point in his life, though, Biwa was glad things had turned out the way they did. He'd become fluent in English because his parents were the only people in his life who spoke Japanese. If he'd been surrounded by other Japanese children, it probably would have taken him much longer to master the new language.

Total immersion—sink or swim—was undoubtedly the best way for him to learn a foreign language.

It'd taken him a year to lose his apprehensions about carrying on daily conversations in English. Becoming completely fluent took another five. He had soon lived in America longer than in Japan. The number of Japanese friends Biwa had shrank accordingly, and his friends in the U.S. multiplied.

However, Biwa planned on attending college in Japan after graduating from high school. He came to this conclusion without consulting his father; if he ever intended to find employment in Japan, things could be tough if he didn't at least get back in touch with the culture as a college student. At any rate, he didn't plan on living in America for the rest of his life, so it seemed the natural step to take.

Or at least that's why he'd believed up to a certain point in his life.

During his junior year in high school, Biwa's father decided to return to Japan. When his father informed Biwa of this in his matter-of-fact manner, Biwa replied, "That's fine by me, Dad."

His father looked at him. "You've spent most of your life as a student here in the U.S. High school life in Japan might not agree with you at this late stage. If you want to finish up here, then that's what you should do."

"What about college?" Biwa asked in return.

"You should do what feels best. You should go to the college of your choice, in Japan or America."

Maybe, thought Biwa. *Maybe* someone had already told his parents. In that case, this was as good

an opportunity as any. "Yes, there's something I'd like to do," he said, with all the seriousness he could muster. His parents didn't seem all that surprised. "I'd like to attend college here, too."

At some point, Biwa had started paying more attention to American television programs than those from Japan. Especially series dramas, when they drew his interest. When they didn't, he didn't care even if they were cancelled in the middle of the story. Perhaps because of the sense of tension that they produced (in a good way), he found long-running series fascinating no matter what their genre.

During "prime time," when each television network went head-to-head with its best productions, the question of what to watch always left him in a quandary.

A hit series catapulted its actors to stardom. With highly-rated series that went on for years, a single episode could cost between one and two million dollars. Optimally, a single season of American television ran twenty-four episodes, bringing the total yearly budget to around forty million dollars.

Of course, the dark side of this picture was the huge number of drama series whose ratings faltered and were cancelled. But very few series made the cut and even got on the air.

American television production companies created programs which were then purchased by the networks. Every year, around a hundred scripts went into pre-production, with about twenty making it through the

wringer. And those lucky enough to make it that far still had to face the meat-grinder of the ratings wars.

So only the choicest cuts should be left behind.

Among the dramatic television series, there were a certain number of "monster hits." No matter how long they ran, their ratings never fell. Far from it; they grew steadily in popularity. Among them was a sitcom—famous even in Japan—about which a "behind the scenes" documentary had been broadcast.

Making a single episode took a week at the most. But this was a thirty-minute show. Biwa naively imagined that a week would be more than enough time to put an episode together. But what struck him the most were the battles that went on among the top-flight talent.

Ten or so screenwriters got together and pitched ideas, no matter how dull or outrageous. That really surprised him. This particular program was not written by any one person.

The director, cinematographer, editor, composer, stage manager, and even Foley artists pitched in as well. It was a collaborative effort until the day the episode was shot. And as soon as one episode was in the can, they were busily moving on to the next. Even while filming the show, if the audience reaction wasn't as expected, they'd have the crew there rewriting the script on the spot.

Anything the slightest bit more interesting.
Anything the slightest bit better.

Biwa was glued to the tube. He felt flushed. Though that really couldn't describe his state of mind. It

was more the feeling that this was something he totally wanted to be a part of.

No time to sleep. A constant battle with time. Taxing every brain cell right up to the final moment for ways to make it better. And then having fruits of their efforts broadcast in prime time.

Everybody knew who the stars were. Nobody knew who was on the actual production team. But that's where Biwa's interest was drawn. He couldn't imagine anything more enjoyable than being one of them.

Since that time, his dream had been to work in series television. Not in front of the camera, but behind it. He wanted to make television. That was the club he wished to join, the inner circle he wished to be a part of.

Privately, he amassed information about colleges that taught video and film production. Among the three top schools with ties to the motion picture industry, two were in Los Angeles, where Hollywood was located. They no doubt had a lot to offer.

Biwa explained all this in something of a daze. His mother appeared slightly taken aback, his father as stone-faced as usual.

"That's why I want to go to Los Angeles," Biwa said, bowing his head in supplication.

"Getting ahead in an occupation like that involves a lot of luck," his father stated in his cool and rational tone of voice. "If you don't succeed, there's no laying the blame at anyone else's feet. It's all on your head. Understand?"

"Eh?" Biwa had been sure his father would

object. This answer was not what he expected.

"Is that okay with you?"

Biwa blinked several times. His mother shrugged.

"If I said no, would you have abandoned the idea?"

"I don't want to, but—" Biwa glanced at his father. "You're not against this? I may end up treading water for a long time."

"Well, that's true of life in general." Though his father's voice never wavered, Biwa knew he was holding a lot inside. "When we brought you here, we didn't give you much of a choice in the matter. I suppose I was being the selfish one. I didn't want to split the family up. But from now on, you should live your life as you see fit. It's your life, after all."

A fierce expression rose to his face. "Whatever decisions you make become your own responsibility. That's a lot more difficult than it sounds. Don't become one of those people who always blame the world for the way things turned out."

"I understand." Biwa looked his father straight in the eye and nodded.

Trailing behind every successful person were tens—no, hundreds—more who gave up along the way. There must be scores of resentful failures who never grew out of their dreams, who put all doubts about their own abilities behind them and scorned the masses who didn't understand them, who believed that given that once chance, that one lucky break, success could not be denied.

That was true not only of the entertainment industry, but of society in general. And thus the warning his father was giving him.

"And the university you want to attend has a pretty high bar. You can't just study your way in. You'll need to become accomplished in a wide range of activities."

Japanese universities admitted students based on their entrance exam scores alone. American universities employed a much wider range of measures. They not only considered high school GPA and SAT scores, but also a student's extracurricular activities and the substance of his college application essay.

From that day forth, Biwa set that dream ahead of him as his goal.

First, he won admission to college. Then, having completed his general education courses, he had to make the grades to get accepted into the "Film & Television Production" program.

After that, he knuckled down and worked hard. He was on top of the world while taking his major courses. He didn't consider the thirty-minute drama he'd created for a class project the best thing he'd ever done, but he sent it off to a production company and they offered him a job.

It didn't pay much, though.

Money wasn't a problem. Which wasn't to say that more money wouldn't be better. But working in the business was what mattered, so he jumped at the chance.

He graduated from college and went to work

at his dream job. He spent three years in the trenches, doing whatever job was asked of him, breathing the air of the soundstage. That's where he learned everything that he couldn't from a documentary or in a university lecture hall.

The desire to become part of that inner circle soon blossomed within him. He didn't want to be known as, "Hey, you!". He wanted them to remember who he was.

The thought suddenly occurred to him: *I should write a screenplay*. A screenplay that tapped into his own natural strengths.

Figuring a series proposal would get rejected out of hand, he wrote a script for a single episode. After a fair amount of tweaking and editing, it was accepted. Perhaps because that show did okay in the ratings, he was asked to join a team creating a pilot debuting in the next year's fall season.

A pilot episode meant a full-length mockup for a proposed series to be presented to the network. But the networks were deluged with pilots, so there'd be no cutting of corners. More than writing a script, the production schedule had to be planned out and the budgets calculated. They had to come up with a top quality product.

And that was only the first step.

From the start, Biwa wasn't sure if he could pull his weight. Among the many writers on the team, he was the low man on the totem pole. However, there was a big difference between being able to express an opinion and not being able to. He didn't yet know what kind of story

arc the series was going to use, but he was going to give it all he had.

He arrived at the production company and parked his car. It was a bit of a hike to the front door. Parking spaces were assigned, and the greater one's contribution to the corporate bottom line, the closer one's space was to the entrance.

Someday, Biwa thought. *Someday* he was going to end up *there*.

He'd just turned twenty-six. In the entertainment world, he could hardly be called a spring chicken. There were plenty of people who'd come into their prime at that age. If the talent was there, nothing else mattered. Everything came down to bringing in the boffo ratings.

"Hi there, Biwa. Good morning." Walking in the front door, his colleague Brenda stopped and gave him a long look. "So, what's with the suit?"

"My first day on the production team." He usually showed up on set wearing a T-shirt and jeans, so her reaction was understandable.

"Ah," said Brenda with a nod. "That's right. Well, it stands to reason."

"Stands to reason?" Did she mean because that episode he wrote got such good ratings?

"Oh, you haven't heard?" said Brenda, a surprised look on her face. "The upcoming series—"

Halfway through her sentence, Biwa felt a jarring blow from behind. He staggered forward before catching his balance. As this was a high-traffic area with people coming in and out of the building, standing

there gabbing wasn't the best of ideas. But Biwa hadn't expected anyone to plow right into him.

In any case, what kind of a pompous ass would come charging through without a word of warning? Biwa looked back over his shoulder. The man behind Biwa had jet-black hair and a sour look on his attractive face, and looked very much out of sorts. He glared at Biwa.

What the hell! If anybody deserves a look, it's you!

The man haughtily jerked his face away and continued down the hallway without a word of apology. A squat, middle-aged man trailed after him. "Excuse me," he mumbled.

Nice try, mister, but my beef ain't with you!

"Hey, it's him—" Brenda said, a serious expression darkening her face.

Still staring at the man's retreating back, Biwa didn't answer at once. "What? Him who?"

"You don't know, Biwa? He's some kind of real famous actor from Japan."

"Huh."

Not being up to date on the Japanese entertainment business, he couldn't be expected to know stuff like that. If this guy thought that being famous in Japan would buy him the same kind of traction here, he must be smoking something. He'd be looking to take a long walk off a short pier, and it'd serve him right.

In any case, what was an actor from Japan doing in L.A.? Biwa asked, "So, what's the story?"

"Seems the last time our producer was in Japan,

he saw a series this guy was in and took a liking to him. They're looking to cast him as the lead in this pilot we're doing. Japanese pop culture is pretty big these days, eh?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

T-shirts with kanji printed on them were a hot item. A lot more kids were studying Japanese in school. All things Japanese were "cool" these days. Though Biwa figured it was all bound to cool off just as quickly.

"Stands to reason, doesn't it?"

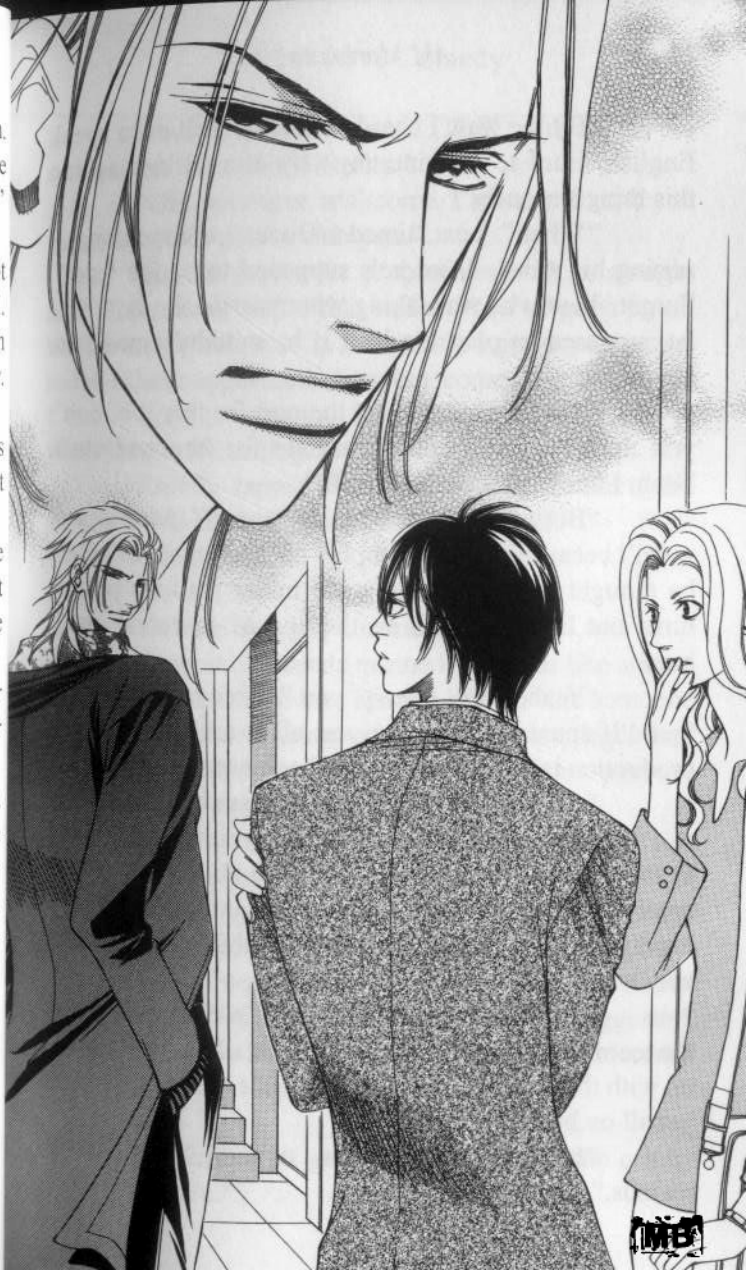
"I suppose. Wait a minute—" Had his ears deceived him? What was that other bombshell she'd just dropped? "Did you say the *lead*?"

"Yeah. Rumor is, it's going to be a police procedural. Didn't several members of the development team suggest casting a Japanese actor? They pitched the idea hard and managed to get him over here."

"Him?" Some jerk who doesn't apologize for running into people? In a single-lead drama slotted for prime time?

The common assumption was that an actor with talent could get away with being an asshole. But once he'd gotten a good, hard look at this business, Biwa knew that wasn't the case. Whether television or the movies, it was a team effort. If a person developed a reputation for not being a team player, then, as the saying went, they'd never work in this town again.

Even the marquee talent (and those were rare) knew that the casting calls could stop coming at any moment, so the more human networking they did, the better. And that wasn't something an asshole was likely to be any good at.



"By the way, I heard that he doesn't even speak English. Hard to imagine anybody around here taking this thing seriously."

"What!" exclaimed Biwa, unintentionally raising his voice. "And he's supposed to be the lead?" Forget about who was taking whom seriously; how was he supposed to play the lead if he couldn't speak the language?

"That's why you got the nod for this job, don't you think? So you could translate for him and stuff. Yeah, I know, that can't sit well."

"Because we're both Japanese?" Meaning it wasn't because of the screenplay he'd written. Just when he thought he'd made the grade under his own power, turns out he was a fish on the end of someone else's hook.

"Yeah. Hey, I envy you." Brenda pursed her lips. "If speaking Japanese was all it took to get on a production team, then I shoulda been born Japanese."

"All because of *him*—" Biwa scowled.

Brenda shrugged. "You take your opportunities as they come — and you don't quibble about where they came from. Get the job done, and you'll get noticed eventually. Not even something like this has come my way, yet."

That was, indeed, the truth. Even if getting on the team meant grabbing onto *his* coattails, if Biwa came up with the goods, then he didn't doubt the next job he'd get all on his own.

"I mean it," Brenda sighed. "I'm totally jealous."

Biwa shook his head. "Still, I'd rather be recognized for my own merits."

"Oh, your time will come, I'm sure. But, if you want, I'll trade places with you."

Brenda made the proposition with a straight face. Biwa said, with a thin smile, "You've got a point. No looking gift horses in the mouth. I guess you've got to take these opportunities as they come."

"Yeah, that's the ticket. Hey, don't be late to your first staff meeting."

Brenda tapped her watch. And, in fact, the meeting was about to start. Biwa hurried off.

"Hey, Brenda!"

"What?"

"What's that guy's name, anyway?"

"Yamato." Brenda grinned. "Sounds like a bona fide Japanese name to me. Though it looks like someone could teach him a thing or two about that legendary samurai chivalry. How about accidentally on purpose feeding him a bit of bad advice?"

"What would I want to cause myself grief like that for?" Biwa shot back in a startled voice.

Brenda pointed her finger at him. "You two screw up and I'm next in line, right?"

Which was why he had to keep his wits about him. Though it would be a kick to do what she suggested. "Later," Biwa waved, and ran off to the conference room.

"I think we'll go with something in the crime/suspense genre."

Dramas based on the forensic sciences had recently become big hits, so all the networks were vying with one another, producing scads of series with similar themes. Biwa didn't have anything against the genre, per se, and thought it presented some interesting possibilities. But the fall lineups were getting a bit over-saturated. Besides, watching one after another got depressing after a while.

At times like that, what he wanted to turn to was a situation comedy. A sit-com. Not too long ago, a particular sit-com had ended its ten-year run. According to the Nielsen ratings, over fifty million people had tuned in for the final episode.

In the world of series television, where a show got the axe as soon as its ratings slipped, Biwa couldn't imagine anything better than being able to carefully construct a final episode knowing that fifty million people or more were eagerly looking forward to it. The thought alone made him seethe with envy.

Plenty of writers unintentionally ended up writing the final episode of a series. Very few did so with that goal on their minds from the start. And *that* particular series was a cut above the rest. Biwa occasionally caught it in reruns, and that final episode still brought tears to his eyes.

Since then, though, no hit sit-com had come along that could match its ratings. So, he had to think that now was as good a time as any. No one was asking him, though.

"At any rate, the only thing set in stone at this point is the lead." The producer indicated the Japanese

man sitting at the back of the room with a sullen look on his face. "His name is Toyohira Yamato." He glanced at the sheet of paper in his hands. "The kanji is on the memo you all should have gotten. Yeah, it looks kinda cute."

Biwa glanced through the memo. The actor's name was written Toyohira ("bountiful peace") Yamato ("great harmony," the name for ancient Japan). But *cute*? What the hell was cute about his name? Far from it; the name struck Biwa as a grim holdover from an ancient, militaristic era.

At least "Yamato" wasn't a name that most Americans would stumble over. "Toyohira" was something of a mouthful.

"Last time I was in Japan, he appeared in a television program I watched on occasion. Of course, I didn't understand what they were saying, but he really jumped off the screen."

Biwa glanced at Yamato. He had an interpreter there, jabbering on in Japanese, so odds were good that he wasn't following what the producer was saying directly.

Is this guy going to be okay? Biwa had to ask himself. The television business was a wild and woolly place; there was no such thing as a "final script." The next day, on location, the whole thing could take a one-eighty. There'd never be enough time to translate everything and memorize it all over again.

He'd have some slack to work with while making the pilot, perhaps, but once the network picked up the option and it became a full-blown production,

he'd have himself one hard row to hoe.

Biwa hadn't seen him smile once. His dour expression indicated no inclination to rub elbows with the rest of them. However big he was in Japan, on this side of the Pacific, Biwa couldn't predict how well he would do in a market where nobody knew his name. If they decided to drop him and go with another lead, well, it'd serve him right.

For any number of reasons, Biwa found himself a lot more hostile to Yamato's presence than he'd expected. After all, he told himself, he'd finally got himself the screenwriting job he'd been striving for his entire life. Thinking about it, he'd been so keyed up the night before that he'd barely been able to sleep.

But *him*, on the other hand—thinking black thoughts, Biwa glanced at Yamato. He sat there with his legs crossed like he owned the world. He didn't have a clue—he couldn't appreciate—what it took to get here, or how many actors would give their right arm to be cast in a big-name production like this.

If this show became a hit, he'd never have to worry about putting food on the table for the rest of his life. It was the very definition of the "American dream," which only a handful of actors would ever have within their grasp. But he'd gotten his shot, thanks to the whim of a powerful producer, without an audition. If he didn't show a little humility, he was going to arouse a lot of bad feelings.

Was a "How do you do?" and a "Glad to meet you" too much to ask for?

Perhaps feeling Biwa's eyes upon him, Yamato

met his gaze. Before Biwa could avert his eyes, he caught a look even harsher than when the two of them collided in the hallway.

What an *asshole*! Listening with one ear to what the producer was saying, Biwa struggled to keep his emotions in check. If things came down to him or Yamato, he didn't need to ask who the producer would side with. *And don't let the door hit you on the way out!*

Replacements for Biwa were a dime a dozen.

Still, there was no call for going around giving people dirty looks. Okay, his bad for staring, but was this guy going to flash the evil eye every time somebody ran into him? What if he ran into a bigger bigwig than him?

When he slipped another peek, Yamato had turned the other way and was looking out the window. He didn't appear to give a damn about what was going on in the conference room.

God, this guy rubbed him in every possible wrong way!

Biwa took a deep breath. *Calm down*. He couldn't let this one guy get to him like this. Even Yamato would get a clue once shooting started. The guy was only an actor, and couldn't speak English to boot. Hadn't Alfred Hitchcock said that actors were like cattle? People would realize pretty quickly that, without the producer's brand on his hide, he'd be headed for the slaughterhouse.

And Biwa, for once, would be looking forward to it!

"Well, let's start out by nailing down the story and the characters," the producer said, and everyone came to attention.

The rubber finally met the road. Biwa exulted to himself and pushed any further thoughts of Yamato from his mind.

"To sum up, in an infamous police department where old-style racist attitudes still have purchase, a highly-regarded Japanese cop finds a way to fit in. Something like that."

"Which aspect would be best to focus on?" asked a writer, well known in the Hollywood community.

The producer shrugged. "Hey, you tell me. Crank out a couple of treatments, and I'll go with the best one."

"How about the cast?"

"Bare minimum, we're talking five or six supporting roles. And we definitely need somebody opposite the lead, playing the heel to the bitter end."

Biwa made notes on everything. Starting today, his real job would begin.

"Since the subtext is all about racism, let's make sure we cast these roles accordingly."

"Got it."

"Anything else?"

"You definitely want the character to be a detective?" someone else asked.

The producer spun his pen around on his thumb. "Yeah, we're not doing another *CSI* spin-off." That quip raised a chuckle. "And we've run the gamut with CIA and FBI agents, as well. The whole cop-on-the-beat thing is too human interest for me. I want cases that'll keep the viewers tuning in. Assuming you got *that*, if you come up with anything other than a detective, go

ahead and bounce it off me at the next meeting."

"Why not ask for the moon while you're at it?" someone else muttered. "If you're talking about keeping this thing real, then the kinds of cases that draw the spotlight are pretty mainstream cops and robbers stuff. There's a lot we can do with a police detective, but nothing that hasn't been done before."

"That's what I'm paying you guys the big bucks for." The producer got to his feet. "Everybody show up tomorrow ready to pitch their synopses. That's all."

Sighs could be heard hear and there. When he said "show up tomorrow," it wasn't a request. Anyone who couldn't deliver would be off the team. Those were the hard and fast ground rules at any production company with a track record of delivering hit shows.

The message was clear: no one was getting paid to keep a seat warm.

"And, uh—" On his way out the door, the producer stopped and glanced down at the paper in his hand. "Is Biwa here?"

"Yes!" said Biwa, jumping to his feet.

The producer beckoned him over. Biwa hurried across the room, his heartbeat racing wildly. What was this all about?

"I want you to look after him," said the producer, as soon as Biwa drew near. "Since committing to come to the U.S., he seems to have studied English a bit, but he's got a way to go. So, I'd like you to show him the bases."

"Sure," Biwa nodded, while thinking: *God, no.* He had zero desire to baby-sit the Japanese

actor. Besides, he hadn't been exempted from presenting a story synopsis for tomorrow's meeting. This was his first outing, and he wasn't likely to dash the thing off in a few minutes. This was not the time to get saddled playing tour guide to this boor, from whom he couldn't expect a word of thanks in any case.

"So I was chosen to be his keeper?"

If that was to be his only chore, then he'd bite the bullet and start sucking up. Working as a jack of all trades until now, he'd managed to make the team. No matter what the circumstances, he stood to learn a lot. If not, then he'd prefer to get out while the getting was good.

"Nah. We just haven't had enough time to find him an assistant. If you're here, you must have what it takes. Hey, I didn't know you were on the team until you showed up."

Biwa couldn't tell from his tone of voice whether the producer was paying him a compliment or not. Still, he felt a great sense of relief. He hadn't been picked just to be Yamato's personal assistant.

"In that case—"

"Okay, then—?" The producer glanced down at his notes again. Apparently he'd forgotten Biwa's name already. "Biwa. Somebody's got to show him the ropes. And because of the way things work around here, that somebody's going to be the one with the thinnest resume. And who would that be?"

"Uh, me."

"I didn't hear you."

"That would be me," Biwa said more forcefully.

"Yes, that would be you. Frankly, right now, the

odds aren't on you coming up with the winning treatment. And this isn't something I want to saddle anybody else with. It pains me to say it, though." He smiled. "Make a good impression and I'll try to remember your name next time, okay? I appreciate the favor."

Not so much a favor as an order from on high.

But them's the breaks. Like the man said, his was the thinnest resume on the team. And being fluent in Japanese made him the natural go-to guy in a situation like this.

A job's a job, Biwa told himself. If this show took off, he could easily work his way to the next. Yamato's attitude notwithstanding, there was no sense getting all pissy about it. A hit show with high ratings. That was the Holy Grail they were searching for.

Biwa took a deep breath and walked up to Yamato, who was still sitting there looking out the window. "Pleased to meet you," he said. "My name's Biwa Uno."

Yamato didn't react in the least. *What the hell's this guy's problem?* Biwa felt snubbed. Someone tries to make nice and that's his reaction?

"Yamato-san," said the middle-aged man Biwa had observed trailing behind him in the lobby. His translator or his manager, he had a perplexed expression on his face.

Finally, Yamato turned to him. "What?" he asked, in an utterly impertinent voice.

If Biwa bailed now, he'd be off the team for sure. And probably out on the street. His cheek twitching, he forced a smile to his face. "I've been assigned to be your

assistant. My name's Biwa Uno. I'm pleased to meet you."
Biwa bowed.

"Huh," he said in a flat voice, with a manner that plainly communicated that he couldn't care less.

Hey, but, I'm talking to you! It's not like I asked for this job.

"Excuse me, Yamato-san," the middle-aged man interceded on his behalf.

"What? Are you a fan?"

"W-what?" Who was this asshole? *Hey, I don't know you from Adam, man! I don't care how many shows you've been in or how famous you are, I'm no fan of yours!* Biwa lifted his head. There was no way he was bowing his head to a guy like this!

"Sorry, but my agent tells me I can't go handing out autographs right and left." He said to the man next to him, "Isn't that right?"

"I believe I asked you not to go around cavalierly signing contracts without my approval. I can assure you this advice does not apply to your fans. Oh, I should have said sooner—"

The man took out a business card and presented it to Biwa. "I'm Mr. Yamato's agent in the United States. His English is still a bit shaky, so I'll be accompanying him to the set for the time being.

The business card was printed in English on the front and in Japanese kanji on the back.

Tadao Nemoto

President & CEO

The Nemoto Company



Nemoto was a major player when it came to Japanese actors and Japan-related talent. Japanese who wanted to make it big in the U.S. were all familiar with the company.

And the company president was handling this guy personally? Biwa had never heard of him, but maybe this guy really was a big star.

"The actual president of Nemoto?" Biwa muttered to himself without thinking.

Nemoto's face brightened. "You're familiar with the company? That's good to know."

"Of course. Any Japanese working in the business knows about Nemoto."

"Still, I'm delighted that somebody working at a big production company like this has even heard of us. The fact is, we've been pushing our actors into every market we can find, but the feedback hasn't been so good." His face darkened. "That's why I'm handling Yamato personally, doing my best to open up fresh opportunities in English-language entertainment and feature films."

"What are you still talking to him for?" Yamato's frosty voice suddenly interrupted. "He's just one of my fans. If you want to pitch me to the studios, then talk to somebody more important. Like that big time producer. One word from him and I get the lead, right?" He shrugged. "It's a piece of cake getting on TV. Japan of America—"

"Give me a fucking break."

Biwa spoke in a low, gravelly voice, so scary that he could hardly believe it was coming from his own

mouth. He could have put up with a bad attitude. He'd just pity the poor fool for thinking that fame in Japan could translate directly to the American market. But—a *piece of cake?*

Did he have any idea of the gauntlet young talent had to run to make it into this business? The extent to which actors would crawl over broken glass for a feature part? Even winning a lead role guaranteed nothing, if they couldn't produce the desired results. Many a thespian slipped back into the obscurity from which they sprang.

And despite all that, the producers and actors and crew kept on trying to produce the best product they could.

A piece of cake?

What an *asshole*.

"Let me fill you in on something, *bud*. I'm no fan of yours. Maybe you've forgotten already, but when you ran into me in the lobby, my only thought was: Who the hell is *that*? You may be hot stuff over there, but *here*, nobody's ever heard of you. The average American knows Masi Oka and Ken Watanabe. And probably George Takei and Pat Morita. He might recognize Sonny Chiba and Takeshi Kitano. And maybe he remembers Toshiro Mifune. That's *it*. And while we're at it, just because you're famous on your little fishbowl of an island, pumping out shitty little dramas, you think every Japanese in spitting distance is your *fan*? What a moron."

Biwa sniffed audibly. He spoke under his breath, a smile on his face. Anyone in the vicinity would

have believed he was on his best behavior. But no matter how he looked on the outside, on the inside he was in a completely different frame of mind. Nobody made it far in this business without growing a backbone.

"For starters, let's consider that star vehicle of yours back in Japan. None of the writers here have heard of it. Forget about the show itself, none of them have heard of *you*. Not a flicker of recognition when you were introduced. But our producer has a hit, one-hour medical drama under his belt. The head writer wrote for an Emmy-winning sit-com. The story runner came to series television after collecting an Academy Award nomination. So what's it say on your resume? There's no shortage of Japanese in Los Angeles, and no shortage of entertainment news about Japan. And yet I didn't have a clue who you were. A piece of cake, eh? What do you say we run that by everybody in the next meeting—in English?" Biwa narrowed his eyes. "They'll kick your ass all the way to LAX."

In fact, the only one getting his ass kicked would be Biwa, but he couldn't stop the words coming out of his mouth. Nemoto had a startled look on his face. Yamato gazed back at him with a sour expression.

"We're looking to create a hit show here. That's our only objective. But if this show taking off results in a guy like you becoming an even bigger ass than he already is, then I say good riddance. May it die before it's born."

Flashing an ill-tempered smile, Biwa switched to English. "And when it does, you can go back to Japan and excuse your failure as some sort of 'fact-finding

mission" to Hollywood, or whatever bullshit excuse you can come up with. And I'll be here, laughing behind your back, 'cause you're the one who deep-sixed his own project. Nothing but a big fish in a little pond."

Biwa spit out the words at a machine gun pace and turned on his heel. No matter what the outcome, he hadn't the slightest desire to be at the beck and call of this jerk. "Why don't you drop in again once you've mastered a little English? Don't think you can take us and what we're doing here for fools."

He spat that out in English as well, and left the room. He was pissed beyond belief, but there was no taking it all back now.

"Son of a *bitch*!"

Every attempt to get any work done on his treatment ended with that same thought. A short time later, after his head cooled off, it dawned on him that he had dearly screwed the pooch. He'd gotten caught up in the moment, said things he couldn't take back, and would be left to repent at leisure. A *lot* of leisure.

You don't think Japanese anymore, said nine out of ten of his friends from Japan. And he had to agree that it was probably true.

To start with, he'd pissed off an actor his producer had taken a liking to. There was no way a piece of work like Yamato was going to let it slide. He was definitely off the team.

"What an idiot I am!"

Why couldn't he have sucked it up for a few more minutes? Dissed him in his mind, instead of out loud? Better to wait for him to fall on his ass first, and

given him a piece of his mind then.

"There's not much point in writing anything now."

At the meeting tomorrow, he'd be told that his services would no longer be required. And Yamato would be there to see his comeuppance.

The more he thought about it, the more depressed and frustrated he became. He was the frog in the well looking up. Until Yamato actually stepped onto the soundstage, there was no way to know what kind of personality he'd project on screen. Besides, if he couldn't speak English, nobody would understand him even if he did carry on in the same high-handed manner in which he'd addressed Biwa.

"God, this is bad." Biwa wrapped his arms around his head.

There was no way he was going to come up with any story ideas in this state of mind.

Chapter 2

"Good morning," Biwa said, as he nervously walked into the conference room the next day.

"Morning," everybody replied.

Huh? Biwa thought in surprise. Someone getting the ax should expect to be ignored, or for eyes to not meet his, or for his presence to be greeted with grim smiles. He definitely hadn't been expecting this laid-back atmosphere.

Perhaps the producer was waiting to deliver the bad news in front of the whole crew, to make a public example of him.

That thought alone sent a shiver down his spine.

In which case, his career would definitely be over. Recognized as the idiot greenhorn writer who pissed off the lead actor, he could expect to have the door slammed in his face wherever he went. Forgiveness would be a long time coming.

If he could only turn back time! *God, shut my mouth.* Biwa earnestly prayed to himself. *For once, grant me the patience of Job! And unwind my life back to where this all began!*

He knew he prayed to no avail, but he did it anyway. He'd destroyed his own lifelong dream of



becoming a screenwriter.

"Yo," said the producer, entering the room. Yamato trailed behind him.

Figures, Biwa told himself in despair. The producer was going to single him out for a special dressing-down!

Maybe he should get out while the getting was good. If he slipped out quietly, maybe no one would notice. Or he could fake an illness and bolt for the door.

"I had a talk with Yamato after the meeting yesterday."

I'm not going to sit here and take this! Biwa resolved, rising from his seat.

The producer and Yamato both turned to look at him. A small smile flitted across Yamato's face.

What the hell is that all about? Celebrating his victory already? Biwa felt a spark kindle in his gut. He wasn't going down without a fight!

"What's up?" the producer queried, in a clearly puzzled tone of voice.

"Sorry, nothing," Biwa replied, sinking back down into his chair. He couldn't flee the field of battle now.

"Forget about work-shopping any of your treatments today."

Nobody complained. Rather, something like a relieved sigh echoed around the room. The whims and moods of this particular producer were not news to anyone.

"Yesterday, Yamato mentioned something to me that I agree with. None of you has actually seen the man

act. That means that trying to create a role for him could prove problematic."

Indeed, if Biwa, the only other Japanese in the room, had never heard of Yamato, then nobody else could be expected to either.

"So I've brought along some examples of his work. Which we are going to watch now."

A very obvious sigh, this time around. Nobody else there understood Japanese. And nobody had any particular interest in Yamato himself. So what was the point of this exercise?

No one voiced their opinion out loud, but the room buzzed with the sentiment. Biwa had watched a fair number of Japanese television series when he was in college. The production values were slipshod and the content lame, and he hadn't bothered with anything like it since. If he had the time to spend watching crap like that, he'd learn a lot more spending it watching classic, Emmy-winning, American television series.

At this stage in his life, he couldn't afford to waste time like that.

So why was he sitting here, watching some show this idiot actor appeared in? He envied his colleagues. They didn't understand Japanese, so none of the dialog was going to soak into the sponges of their brains. Just pretty pictures on a screen.

He, on the other hand, was condemned to chow down on the whole bag of steaming crapola.

The producer grinned, sensing the air of unease in the room. "You'll see what I'm talking about." He slipped a tape into the VCR next to the video screen.

The room was equipped with a complete home theater system.

"This is a montage compiled from series that Yamato has appeared in. The first clip is from a romance."

Following the producer's introduction, a scene filled the screen. *Gag me with a spoon*, Biwa thought to himself. The last thing he wanted to watch was the kind of romantic tearjerker that was all the rage in Japan (or so he'd heard), plainly ripping off the Hollywood "look and feel" or pouring on the deathbed histrionics. He didn't want any part of it, but because he understood Japanese, even if he covered his eyes, he couldn't stop himself from hearing it.

Biwa watched the screen, a grimace on his face. *It's all part of the job*, he repeated to himself.

The man on the screen was telling a woman he loved her.

Hmm. At least he doesn't suck as an actor. All of the power of his emotions was contained in that one line. As if they understood as well, the rest of the crew—most of whom hadn't bothered even to turn around in their chairs—directed their eyes toward the screen.

"I love you, too," she replied

And as his face filled the screen, there was no mistaking the joy in the smile that rose to his lips. From this scene alone, Biwa grasped the essence of the relationship, the extent to which this woman's existence had filled this man's heart for days or years, that was now coming to fruition. Such was the substance of his happiness.

And it even took him a long moment to realize that Yamato was the actor playing the part. There was a gentleness in his features that Biwa could not have imagined on the sour countenance he'd witnessed the day before. The man on the television screen spoke as if the wonder in his heart could not be contained.

The next clip started, and the scene changed. Yamato appeared to be the prosecutor in a courtroom drama. Delivering his voluminous soliloquy, the anger directed at the defendant in the dock was clearly evident.

The conference room fell silent as all eyes were directed toward the screen. The scene changed again. A hospital room filled the screen. Yamato held the hand of a woman lying on a bed. Her age suggested she might be his mother.

Yamato was weeping, not in a grandiose manner, but in a way that communicated the futility of his own grief. In a way that brought even those watching the performance close to tears.

The next clip was about some sort of party, Yamato celebrating in the wake of a job well done.

"Yamato has acted across the full range of human emotion. But this is the reason I recruited him."

The last scene showed him, a knife in hand and on the verge of driving it into the body of another person. Ignoring the pleas for mercy, he brandished the weapon. A close-up of his face revealed the bloodlust, the exultation in death itself radiating from his eyes.

Biwa felt a shiver run through him. The performance was so compelling that he could believe, in

that moment, that Yamato had actually killed the man.

The tape ended. For a while, no one spoke. The producer looked over his audience, a look of triumph on his face. "Yeah, maybe you thought I was just jumping on the latest fad to come out of Japan, or making some fanciful, spur-of-the-moment decision. But let me ask you, how far do you think I'd get in this business making decisions like that? Very few actors do anything for me from the other side of the television screen. Yamato happens to be one of the recent few."

The producer took his seat. "As you have now seen for yourself, this guy can handle whatever's thrown at him. So think outside the box. Forget about him being Japanese. Forget about him speaking or not speaking English. He's a pro. I don't want to see that talent languishing away in Japan."

"Still—" One of the staff members raised her hand. "I hate to say it, but playing a part a little bit crazy or out of control is the easiest emotion for an actor to handle. You're evaluating his abilities on that alone?"

"What, you didn't feel it?" The producer laughed scornfully at her objection. "You felt like he could shiv you right here and now, right? It could never happen—because he's only an image on a screen—and yet, you felt as if he could come flying out of that television and murder you right on the spot, eh? If you didn't feel that, then forget about it. If you didn't feel a shiver down your spine watching that, then you got no business being here. You're welcome to leave."

Dead silence. Everyone looked at everyone else, but no one took him up on the offer. In short, they all

recognized Yamato's talent.

"Could I say something?" Unrushed but well-articulated English emerged from Yamato's mouth.

At first, Biwa thought he was hearing things, but Yamato's mouth was definitely moving.

"Oh, sure. Chip in whenever you want."

"My name is Toyohira Yamato." In a complete turnaround from the day before, Yamato followed this statement with a courteous nod of his head.

Biwa's mouth practically dropped in surprise. Could a person really change that much in one day? One day not speaking a word of English, the next fluent? Or was his meeting yesterday with Yamato a dream and today the reality?

Unfortunately, no. Biwa's eyes fell on the treatment in front of him. It outlined a story about an ill-tempered Japanese detective who was rightly loathed by everyone around him. Biwa couldn't stop fuming whenever he recalled Yamato's attitude, and this was the product of what was in his head. Nothing else would suffice.

When the producer told them to set aside their treatments, he may have been the only one breathing a huge sigh of relief.

"I studied English before coming here, but I would not call myself fluent. Following rapidly-spoken dialog is difficult. But before shooting begins, I should have things under control. I intend to work hard to meet everyone's expectations. You have not heard about me before or seen me before, so many of you must have doubts about casting me in the lead. I hope to show you

that your producer's eyes were not deceiving him. I look forward to reading all of your scripts."

It didn't sound like an off-the-cuff speech—Yamato had most certainly memorized it beforehand—but, with a single stroke, the previously sullen, aloof Yamato had significantly increased his reservoirs of good will. As could be expected, a markedly friendly air began to suffuse the conference room.

"Can I ask you a question?" the head writer asked.

"Sure," said Yamato. "But ask it slowly and make it easy."

This provoked a laugh. Yamato struck everybody as an easygoing guy.

"Well, I don't know how easy it is, but I'll try to pace myself." The writer smiled. "What are your strengths as an actor?"

"My strengths?" A perplexed expression came to Yamato's face. "Well—ah—anything that—ah—"

"I'll translate for you," said Biwa.

Surprised by the offer, Yamato looked at Biwa. Without changing his expression, Biwa briskly walked over next to where Yamato was sitting.

"Thanks," Yamato said. Taking a relieved breath he began speaking in Japanese. "I've been thinking about what you said yesterday—"

"We can discuss that later," Biwa scolded him. "For the time being, let's answer the question." Yamato glanced up at him. "So what do you want me to say?"

"I immerse myself in any role I'm given. Frankly, I haven't met the part I couldn't master."



Biwa related that in English. The team nodded as if in agreement with the sentiment.

"You seem to have done a lot of work in drama. What about comedies?"

Yamato answered by himself. "I've done comedies as well. However—" And here he turned to Biwa. "Knowing that this series would be a police procedural, I thought it better to show off my serious side."

More nods of agreement. After that, the Q&A proceeded with Yamato answering the questions as well as he could and Biwa filling in the gaps. The queries posed by the staff and crew became more on-point and pragmatic.

"What if he was really cast as the villain?"

"And just playing at being the good guy?"

"It looks like we could write in some unexpected plot twists. Yamato could handle it."

Snatches of conversation could be heard here and there around the room. The fact that they were identifying him by name was proof that they had recognized his abilities. After observing this for a while, the producer held up his hand.

"As things stand now, we're a day behind schedule. Come tomorrow ready to pitch your treatments."

"Gotcha."

"Check."

The writers acknowledged their assignment. They still didn't know what kind of part it would be. More than this being an actor the producer had taken

under his wing was the recognition that this was an actor with chops, and writing for talent made the job that much easier. Fresh ideas bubbling up already, many of the writers all but bolted from the room.

"Hey, new guy!" the producer called out. Biwa turned around. He still hadn't learned his name. "Yesterday, it didn't look like Yamato wanted to take you on as his assistant, but he had to put this demo tape together, so don't take it personally. Consider yourself on the job starting today."

"What?" He said he didn't want to take *me* on?

"Don't make me repeat myself. You're the newbie here."

"Yes, but that's not—" Biwa's voice faded to a mumble. "I mean, he didn't mention anything else?"

"Like what?" A dubious look rose to the producer's face. "C'mon, you're not telling me you've been trying to pitch yourself to Yamato personally?"

"No, the thought never crossed my mind!"

The reality was quite the opposite. Rather than trying to weasel into Yamato's good graces, he'd surely left nothing but a bad taste in the man's mouth.

"Could be, could be. In any case, whatever you're selling, don't matter if you've got no buyer. No harm, no foul. Besides, considering Yamato's English skills at the moment, the odds are good he's not always getting across the message he wants. Assuming only makes an ass out of you and me, eh? Well, he's all yours."

With that bit of sage advice, the producer left the room. Only Biwa and Yamato remained behind in the

room. Having no idea what his actual status was, Biwa could only tilt his head to the side in confusion. What in the world was going on?

"Sorry about yesterday."

With something of a start, Biwa cast his eyes around the room. The only people here were himself and Yamato. Had Yamato just said that? Was he apologizing? Biwa looked at Yamato with trepidation.

Yamato calmly met his gaze and said, "My intent was not to take this job for granted. I've long been a fan of American television dramas." He continued on without being prompted. "I'd always dreamed of breaking into the business here, but I never had a chance until now. Frankly, I can hardly believe it, myself."

Yamato was talking like a real person. There was no harsh glint in his eyes. He wasn't making a bad impression. Far from it, his was the appealing visage to be expected of a beloved and popular performer.

"So, I figured I'd put on a tough front and act like it was no big deal. My mistake. You know what you said about pretending this was just some 'fact-finding' trip? I actually considered that excuse. You really held a mirror up in front of my face yesterday."

"I—"

Yamato interrupted him. "Nobody else knows what you actually said. I somehow managed to hold it in."

He smiled a simple and honest smile. It was the first time Biwa had seen him do so. His heart jumped in his chest. It was often said that an actor's charms were not limited to members of the opposite sex. Which

would make this a perfectly normal reaction.

A normal reaction? Really?

"But, at the same time, it took a load off my mind. No kidding. Nobody knew who I was. I'm plenty famous in Japan," Yamato said with a sly smile. "But here I'm a nobody."

"But the production crew knows your name already. That's a lot more impressive than it sounds."

"I guess so. And you're still, 'Hey, new guy!'"

"Well, them's the breaks," Biwa said dejectedly. "At this point, my resume's pretty devoid of accomplishments."

"You mean you didn't come here ready to rumble, like the other day?"

Yamato posed the question kiddingly, but Biwa's head only slumped further. "Sorry for being so rude to you. It's just that I've been working my butt off to get my foot in the door, and hearing this job called a piece of cake kind of set me off."

"I understand," Yamato said gently. Biwa raised his head and Yamato smiled at him. "But some of the things you said really got to me as well. I decided it'd be a good idea if you could all get an idea of my true measure. In any case, I knew that people—not just the producer—were harboring certain expectations. If things turned out badly, I'd be left to write it down to experience and go home. Needless to say, I'm greatly relieved." He put his hand to his chest. "About halfway through, I think I detected a change of attitude."

"Yeah. I thought so too."

And not just halfway through. From the start.

The atmosphere in the room had changed for the better as soon as everyone got drawn into Yamato's performance.

"While I'm pleased that they recognized my acting skills, had things turned out differently, not being able to make myself understood might have been the deal-breaker."

"I don't think so," said Biwa, shaking his head. "You see, the thought of submitting a script to the group scares me half to death. Makes me want to run away and hide. And if it sucked, I probably would. But you didn't do that. Because you've got confidence in yourself, right?"

Despite what fame and distinction some of them may have achieved, the members of this crew undoubtedly knew this as well. They put on their gloves and climbed into the ring, fully aware that they had a fifty-fifty chance of getting knocked out in the first round.

"Yeah, I guess so," Yamato said with a shrug. A big, very American shrug of exaggerated nonchalance. But somehow it was a gesture that Yamato wore well. "It'd be better to not even roll film in the first place than to get benched halfway through the pilot because they figure they got no use for me. But a dream's a dream, eh?"

Yamato's eye glittered and Biwa's heart thumped. Why couldn't he get a grip on his pulse?

"I've been dreaming of this pretty much forever. When I was a little kid, there was an American sit-com that I was totally in love with." He mentioned the title of

a once-famous television series. The twins in that show were now celebrities. Biwa had enjoyed the show as well.

"I always thought to myself: this is America! Watching that show is what inspired me to become an actor."

The first sit-com that had made a similar impression on Biwa was about a psychiatrist who was the host of a radio talk show.

"Ah, yes," said Yamato with a nod. "The wife of the younger brother was often mentioned, but they never showed her face."

"That's right! And so the picture of her in your head became more and more outrageous."

"Like, is this person even human?"

"But didn't you really want to see what she looked like? Sort of like the monster in your closet?"

Yamato grinned. "I actually kept a journal of everything that man's wife purportedly did."

"I did the same thing!" In his delight, Biwa gave Yamato a high-five that turned into a handshake. "How about creating your own profile of her?"

Yamato continued holding onto Biwa's hand. "Naturally. But I couldn't turn her into a real, live human being."

"I concluded it was simply impossible."

"It really was."

They both nodded, their hands still clasped.

"What else did you like?"

"Recently, all the shows featuring forensic science have been pretty interesting. And that show

about the guy who's always fighting terrorists. I heard it recently won an Emmy."

"Yeah, good show. Frankly, I find most of the prime time dramas pretty interesting. And the ones that aren't don't stay around long."

"Yes. And it's better that way." Yamato sighed. "Series in Japan are all programmed for a set number of episodes. So no matter how dumb things get, no matter how far the ratings fall, they keep on making 'em until they've reached the end. Not to mention that so many of them are derived from existing work. It makes a mere actor want to start producing television himself!"

The strength of Biwa's enthusiasm for this declaration briefly expressed itself in the grip he still had on Yamato's hand. Yamato knit his brows a bit.

"Oh, sorry," said Biwa, letting go. "It's just that, the goal of making a better television series is what gets everybody in this business up in the morning. You're talking common sense, here. The only question is how." He hesitated and then said, almost under his breath, "This is really good to hear."

"And it pleases me to hear you say so. So, you've finally come around to giving me my fair due?"

Biwa wanted to say that he'd "come around" since watching that montage tape, but, feeling too self-conscious, he hit Yamato with a question instead.

"I don't suppose you remembered my name, do you?"

Yamato shook his head. "But, I only heard your name once yesterday. Or was it twice?"

"Hard to say. I'm pretty sure I told you a second

time after you ignored me the first time."

"I was in a lousy mood yesterday. My bad. Sorry."

"No problem. Don't worry about it." Biwa grinned.

Yamato shot him a startled look. "I apologize and that's all you say in return?"

"Sure. Why?" Biwa said blankly. "I mean, you said sorry and I said no problem. Isn't that the way it usually works?"

"So, there's no admitting you were wrong in the bargain?"

"Another topic for another time. You said you were sorry. I said it wasn't a problem. That finishes off the matter of your bad attitude yesterday. As for you running into me in the lobby and giving me an eyeful, well, we'll call that bygones, as well."

"Oh, that," Yamato said mostly to himself. "Long story short, I really was feeling the strain right then, and with you standing in my way, I couldn't help thinking of you as the personification of your whole company's ill intent toward me."

"You're overthinking this," Biwa said with a wry smile. "Besides, I was in the wrong as well, standing there in the lobby talking. So, let's call it even."

Yamato quickly agreed. "Indeed. Stands to reason."

Biwa burst out laughing. "In any case, doesn't that count as an apology?"

"Well, you did suggest we call it even. That should suffice. And you are?"

"Biwa Uno," he said with a nod of his head.

"Biwa? You mean, the same *kanji* as loquat?"

"Yeah. Cute name, huh?"

"But, for a guy?" Yamato frowned in thought.

"It suits you, though. You've got a cute face."

"Hey, watch it!" Biwa loudly protested. "You're hardly in any position to be making comments like that!"

"And why's that?"

"Age-wise, you're my junior, right?"

The fact was, the day before, Biwa had done a little research on the internet. As it turned out, Yamato was indeed revered in Japan as one of the best of their contemporary actors. When Biwa emailed his Japanese friends about him, they were surprised that everyone didn't know who he was. That's how famous he was. He was twenty-two years old, four years younger than Biwa.

"Are you saying I don't look like an adult?"

Yamato soberly queried.

Biwa responded impassively. "Sure, for a man of the Orient, you look exactly your age. Why?"

"A baby-faced guy like you saying so isn't exactly reassuring."

"Hey, I'm twenty-six!" Biwa yelped. "I graduated from film school and have been working here for three years. Besides, they're not going to let some kid on a production team like this unless he's a freaking genius."

"I get it, I get it," Yamato muttered.

"This is something I've been pursuing my whole life. And with a little bit of luck, I've finally arrived.

Still, it's hard to ignore the fact that I'm Japanese, and that there are guys on the team younger than me. So, I've probably gotten a bit defensive about it."

Yamato gave him a hard look. "It's true that Japanese look younger than they are. And, in your case, all the more so."

"Enough of this subject, already," Biwa shot back. "Why do you go and pop the balloon whenever somebody is trying to apologize for something?"

"Well, I guess it's because I'm not fishing about for apologies," Yamato said with a stern smile. "You cast a lot of aspersions at me the other day, and, having grown up in the Japanese entertainment business, I think I have a right to respond. Everybody takes their jobs very seriously, and nothing comes easy. But thanks to you taking me down a few notches, I looked at things with fresh eyes. So let's save our apologies for when the pilot is completed and we get the nod from the network and we can all step back and take a breather. Okay?"

"You know, Yamato—" This Yamato could really man up when it counted. But Biwa couldn't get the words out of his mouth.

A quizzical expression came to Yamato's face.

"Oh, it's nothing," Biwa said.

"Something seems to be on your mind."

"Tell you what. When you get rich and famous here, I'll tell you."

"And when that time comes, are you sure you'll remember to?"

Biwa grinned. "Just to be sure, it'd better happen quickly, then."

He'd found himself a fellow compatriot who loved American television dramas as much as he did, and was realizing his dream of getting a foot in the door. And they would be working together. He couldn't help but find that a satisfying thought.

It wasn't so much that Yamato had caught the producer's eye and that he had been steamrolled through the front door. Rather, the producer had made a fair evaluation of Yamato's talents, and thus had chosen him for the lead.

"Hey, so, what kind of role do you want to play?"

At this point, Biwa was thinking along completely different dramatic lines from yesterday. He now believed Yamato could handle any part he wrote for him.

"Hmm. How about one about three guys and three girls who start out as friends and then fall in love with each other?"

"It's been done!"

"Or something about the life and times of a neurotic female lawyer?"

"That, too!"

"Or four women living their lives on the stage we call New York City?"

"And who are you, Mr. Big?"

"Or cast a real-life stand-up comedian as the protagonist, and begin every episode with a live bit from a comedy club."

"That one was never a hit in Japan." Biwa laughed. "You really do have a thing for American sit-coms."

"And then there's—" Yamato reeled off a string of sit-coms.

Biwa could identify every one, not a little amazed at some of the titles he mentioned. Through it all, they exchanged looks and laughs.

"From the mundane to the obscure, I'm sorry to say, I'm a veritable fount of useless information on the subject."

"Yeah, I'd say!" Biwa said with a clap of his hands. "Even I wasn't so sure about a couple of those."

"Is that something a soon-to-be-famous screenwriter should confess to?"

Biwa's voice dropped half an octave. "Well, if that time ever comes—"

What's this? the look on Yamato's face said. "What's wrong with saying it's written in the stars? It's a sure thing!"

"Except, I'm not convinced that saying it will make it so."

Yamato was a fine actor already, but Biwa had no idea whether he would grow into his desired abilities. And it might take him a lifetime to find out. Guys like that were a dime a dozen here in L.A.

"Talent, you know—" Yamato's voice grew softer. "If you can't believe in your own talent, you'll find yourself in a pretty bad place. There were even times when the going got tough and I was ready to walk away from it all. But I told myself I had it in me, and resolved myself all over again. Besides, what it all comes down to is whether you like what you're doing. Even if you have no talent, and life deals one crap hand

after the next, if you take the time and seriously dedicate your life to the cause, I have to believe the effort will deliver the rewards."

"So now the junior is lecturing the elder."

"Whoa, my bad attitude from yesterday must be contagious. You seem to be catching it." Yamato smiled. "Yeah, I guess that would sting, a youngster like me hitting the bull in the eye already."

"I believe that's 'hitting the bull's-eye.' Either way, you've hit the target you were aiming at."

"Not only does he speak English fluently, he even corrects my Japanese to boot! That could really start to get on one's nerves."

"Speaking of which, your English is pretty lackluster." Biwa narrowed his eyes. "Things are going to get rough once shooting starts."

"And I'll get a handle on things before then. Like I told you, provided it's in measured amounts, I can follow the conversation and can say what I have to say."

"In measured amounts, you ain't kidding."

"Hey, I'm sharing here, and you go picking a fight!"

"But your pronunciation does sound very nice," Biwa honestly stated. "Once your listening skills improve, you should speak your mind. Don't worry about making mistakes. I translated for you during the meeting because time was at a premium. But, otherwise, I think your level's high enough to make yourself understood."

"Really?" Yamato said with obvious delight.

"Sure. You've got a good ear. Given the ability to mimic any accent you hear, you shouldn't have any problem speaking quite passable English. Those are some enviable skills you have."

Indeed. Come to think about it, Yamato had made his mark in Japan by the time he reached twenty-two, while at the age of twenty-six Biwa had sold only a single screenplay. Their incomes had to be worlds apart, as well.

"But, I guess listening to what people like me have to say isn't exactly up your alley."

"Suit yourself. Either way, I see no point in feeling any sorrier for ourselves, so let's leave it at that," Yamato added with a quick shrug. "Besides, would we have gotten this far in our careers if we really we found such things so mortifying?"

Biwa pouted silently in the face of Yamato's grin.

"Sure, it hurts having stuff like that shoved in your face. But, in the end, what matters is not giving up on your own talents. That's a whole lot better than getting yourself into a funk over what everybody says."

"Even when somebody totally unloads on you?"

"Not a problem," Yamato answered with a wink. "I can take it and give it back in equal measure."

Biwa felt himself blushing. There was nothing worth reading into that wink—nothing but one of Yamato's stylish mannerisms—but his heart began to race nonetheless.

"I'm afraid you caught me off guard the other

day, and I wasn't able to formulate a reply."

"Ah, now that you mention it, I appreciate you keeping the producer out of the loop." Biwa nodded his head, praying that his blushing cheeks wouldn't betray him.

"Why would I do something like that?" The sound of Yamato's sour voice made Biwa lift his head. Yamato continued, "Like I said, you delivered that blow right to the solar plexus. Do you really think I go around telling tales out of school? Now, that *would* piss me off."

"Yeah, but I'm the newbie writer and you're the actor who got personally cast by the producer—"

"So, I can't help being a tattle-tale?" Yamato snapped. "I think I'm being dissed."

"Sorry. That didn't come out right."

"Well, consider yourself forgiven. But with a condition." A challenging expression rose to his face.

"What?" Biwa asked with great uncertainty.

"You teach me English," he said with a grin.

For a long moment, Biwa could only stare back at him. And then he breathed a sigh of relief. This must be all part of Yamato's *modus operandi* when it came to handing out pardons.

"Okay. After this, whenever we're in the studio, all business will be conducted in English."

"That's awfully harsh, isn't it?"

"But don't you think it'd be a good idea if you learned the lingo used on the set?"

"Well, I suppose—"

"So, starting now, Japanese *ist verboten*. The

first person to use Japanese pays for lunch."

"That's not fair! You speak English like a native!"

Biwa ignored Yamato's protestations. "All right. On your mark. Get set. Go!"

As soon as Biwa said that, Yamato shut his mouth. The cause and effect were so sudden that Biwa couldn't help giggling. Yamato clearly wanted to voice a complaint, but didn't know how to do so in English. The expression on his face had to do the speaking for him.

Biwa smiled and said softly, "The sooner you start speaking English, the better, eh?"

He spoke slowly and clearly, so as not to be misunderstood. Yamato scowled, and then punched him on the shoulder. It was a pulled punch, and Biwa couldn't help but enjoy it. He kept on smiling.

"Ah, I lost!" Yamato cried out in distress. "As long as I'm forking out for lunch, I'm going to speak all the Japanese I want! This crash course in English has got three months to go!"

His voice echoed around the sound stage. The crew building the sets gave him a startled look. Thankfully, none of them could understand Japanese. They were gearing up to shoot a pilot episode for a drama series scheduled for next fall. Knowing that, with a mere three months left on the clock, the lead actor still couldn't even speak English would be cause for concern in anyone's book.

Though it might not turn out to be that big of a problem, after all.

"Hey, you're attracting the wrong kind of attention!" Biwa hissed at him in Japanese.

"Heh. They can go ahead and look. I'm used to it."

That may well be so, Biwa thought. When an actor got to be as famous as Yamato, he probably didn't mind the feeling of people's eyes on him.

"Still, there have got to be people on the set we're really depending on when it comes to getting this pilot off the ground. We don't want them thinking you're wrong in the head, yelling stuff like that out of the clear blue."

"True," Yamato said with a quick nod of his head. "But isn't this set for that other series?" He mentioned the name of a show scheduled to be shot here.

"Yep!" Biwa smiled in reply.

"What are you looking so pleased for?" Yamato asked suspiciously.

"I guess it's just seeing how much you're into American television. You could tell what series it was from the set design alone. I'm impressed."

"What, you still had doubts?" Yamato said, a shocked look on his face. "As I explained before, that whole business about saying it was *easy*—"

"Yes. I know, I know." Biwa shook his head. "But I don't think you've grasped yet how hectic things get around here."

"You really get on my nerves, sometimes," Yamato said, bristling. "I hate to put it this way, but, due to my popularity, I'd often get cast in two series in



the same year. It adds up to doing series for six months, with publicity tours and photo shoots and other Mickey Mouse stuff taking up the balance. I'm lucky to get a week off at the end of the year. This year it was three days. A full day off now and then is a godsend."

Biwa grinned. "You must be on cloud nine then."

Yamato scowled. "How's that?"

"Since coming here, pretty much every day is another day off for you."

"That's stretching the definition of the word awfully far." Yamato heaved a big sigh. "You know, to make this upcoming shoot, I had to reschedule things to within an inch of my life. I got into L.A. the day before yesterday. I had to meet with my agent, 'do lunch' with some people, and then, yesterday, a certain somebody got pissed at me, and, feeling compelled to show them what I've got, I edited together a montage of my work. That kind of crap takes time. I've hardly been getting any sleep, probably because of the jet lag, which means I was ready to fall asleep during this morning's meeting. And now, I'm getting a tour of the studios. Incidentally, my schedule after this includes attending every staff meeting and doing press conferences on days there aren't any meetings. And studying English to boot. Sometime between now and when the final script is settled on, I'll probably fly back to Japan to finish up some projects there. The plan right now is to return three days before regular shooting begins. Hardly enough time to memorize my lines, but I'll cram them in there somehow— Whoa, listen to me go on, and on—"

Yamato's shoulders slumped. "Yeah, every day here is another day off for me."

"Hey, how about I treat you to lunch?"

Listening to Yamato's tirade, Biwa couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him. Being a famous actor in Japan was apparently a pretty demanding job. Circumstances *there* might be quite a bit different from *here*, where an actor with one hit series under his belt wouldn't have to worry about where his next meal was coming from.

"No, that's okay. I'm certainly the one with the deeper pockets."

"Hey, no lording it over people like that." Biwa glanced up at Yamato. "You may well be right, but try not to make it sound like I'm some little match girl starving on the streets."

"Point taken. As one of the cogs in this huge entertainment machine, you might well earn more than me."

"You may rest assured *that* isn't the case."

As the world of television was a functional meritocracy where pay matched performance, employees were hardly guaranteed equal salaries. On his income, Biwa could pay the rent, and, by cooking his own meals and otherwise pinching his pennies, he could afford to splurge once or twice a month.

A producer's economic fortunes were, in comparison to his own, stratospheric. The guy who'd "discovered" Yamato lived in a mansion in Beverly Hills.

"I live a very *un*-extravagant lifestyle. Even

so, there are all these hard-to-get old series and movies that I want to use as source material, and a ton of other stuff that can suck up all my free time. Having money sure would be nice, but it's a different feeling from just wanting to be rich for its own sake. If I do become rich, I want it to be the result of becoming a successful screenwriter."

"Ah, yes, that takes me back, as well." Yamato stared wistfully off into the distance.

"For somebody who's barely reached drinking age, it can't be that far back." Biwa glared at him. "C'mon, who do you take me for?"

"I'm just saying that holding onto your dreams is important. The world changes when you become a household word. I haven't changed, but if I'd experienced that when I was younger, I might well have gotten off on the wrong track."

"And I'm saying you sure ain't old in anybody's book!" Biwa jabbed back.

"True, true. Whether it's Japan or the U.S., plenty of actors make it big as kids, have their every whim catered to, and end up as screwed-up adults."

"You got that right."

Hitting the big time with millions in their pockets while still attending elementary school—it had to be hard to grow up normal in an environment like that.

"But success has ruined all kinds of people, regardless of their age."

It wasn't only child actors—one day stepping suddenly into the limelight, their talents trumpeted far

and wide, and finding themselves richer than God—who ruined their lives with a Hollywood lifestyle.

And that was on the plus side.

Heralded wherever they went, many actors were incapable of escaping the typecasting that won them their fame. The unbridgeable gap between their opportunities and their desires ever growing, they found their spirit and mind separating equally from reality.

That was the down side.

Actors and actresses who achieved success in series television often left the world of acting behind, becoming producers and directors in the movie business. Of their marquee performances, it was said, "They'll never eclipse the fame their original roles achieved for them," and they should never work in television again.

For those who persevered, not only were they doomed to never exceed their previous glories, but having their shows unceremoniously canceled mid-season was par for the course.

Countless actors could say, "I became a success because of *that* role." All the more reason Biwa wanted to create a breakout masterpiece of his own. Just one would suffice. At this point in his life, he wanted to leave something behind that, years from now, people would look at and say, "Sure, everything else he did was crap, but *this* is one for the ages."

He could live with that kind of satisfaction.

"True," Yamato said, "it's not just kids who get dragged down by fame and fortune."

With a start, Biwa came back to himself.

"I suspect that hitting the big time here first

might well have proved a Pyrrhic victory. In Japan, my name always comes first, and what the series is actually about comes second. Everybody knows that my name in the opening credits guarantees a certain return in the ratings. Here, though, nothing like that is guaranteed, eh?"

Yamato gazed around the soundstage. "No matter how unknown the lead, if the show becomes a hit, he'll become an overnight sensation. This isn't a production featuring Toyohira Yamato. It's a production that Toyohira Yamato appeared in."

"Yeah, that sums it up."

Even if nobody knew the name of the actor, if told that he was cast in a particular series, everyone would recall that face to mind. When measuring the success of a series, that was the proof in the pudding.

"That's my dream." Yamato looked over his shoulder at Biwa and smiled. "I don't need an Emmy or a Golden Globe. Well, no, I'm not one to look down my nose at awards, but that's not my Holy Grail. I want people to say, 'Oh, yeah, he starred in *that* series, didn't he?' Once would be enough."

Biwa gave Yamato a surprised look. "Does that make you awfully humble, or terribly vain?" he asked, shaking his head. "I've thought the same thing. It'd be enough to be remembered for one masterpiece."

"I know just where you're coming from. Though we're on the same team this time around, if I get the right kind of offers, I plan to keep on working here. So even when we end up parting company, I'll consider us comrades in arms. And if you figure on showing me up

and crossing that finish line first, I say give it your best shot. Deal?"

"Deal."

Yamato offered his hand and Biwa shook it. He smiled. "It's not just your English that's chancy. I think your Japanese needs some work, too. You said 'comrades,' but don't you mean 'rivals'?"

"Picky, picky," Yamato said, furrowing his brow. "Do you writers ever turn off that dictionary in your heads?"

"Works either way, I guess. Colleagues now, rivals later."

"Sure, works for me."

Biwa let go of Yamato's hand and clenched his own into a fist. "This is the way we do it over here. First, you make a fist."

"Oh, yeah," Yamato responded with a happy grin. "I've seen this in movies. We knock our fists together, right?"

"Yeah. And say, 'Deal.' It was originally a way of sealing an agreement, the same as signing your name on the bottom line. Convenient and hard to forget."

"I get it. Well, then—"

They struck their fists together and said, "Deal." *I can only hope that's how things really turn out*, Biwa thought to himself.

Rivals and comrades-in-arms. That kind of relationship with a great actor like this.

"All right, then. Lunch is on me."

Biwa checked the time. It was already past noon, and it looked like shooting was about to begin.

"Sure," he said with a nod.

"Oh, and Biwa, one more thing."

"What?"

"I'd like you to check out the shows I've been in. I'm not telling you to watch them all the way through, but at least take a look. There are some good shows with good stories. I know they make really compelling shows here in Hollywood, and over in Japan, the shooting schedules and budgets aren't always up to snuff. But I think we do some pretty good work over in Japan. If not, it's kinda like I've wasted my whole life, you know?"

"Sure. Will do."

The next time he was at the video rental shop, he'd look for shows Yamato had appeared in. Thanks to the large number of Japanese in Los Angeles, stores renting Japanese dramas and comedies weren't hard to find.

"I brought a few DVDs with me. You can check out these, first."

Yamato handed him four jewel cases. Biwa hastily handed them back. "No, no. That's okay. I'll rent them at the video store."

"C'mon. Don't make me take them back with me. Yesterday, I resolved to show that Japanese guy with the pretty face and the foul mouth a thing or two! That's why I stuffed these in my bag. You don't want to make me look foolish, now, do you?"

"I'll ignore that last comment of yours," Biwa said, accepting the DVDs. "Thanks. I'll start watching them today."

"Let me know what you think."

"Sure, if I see anything here that's worth thinking about."

"You really do have a smart mouth on you," Yamato said, albeit with a smile. "It's been a long time since I could talk with somebody like this. Hanging out with you ain't half bad."

"No kidding? Having the producer foist you off on me totally stressed me out. I imagined you were going to be nothing but a burden."

In fact, Biwa was enjoying himself as well. Still, for some reason, he didn't want to come across as too accepting, and didn't duck any opportunities to badmouth Yamato in turn.

"That's 'cause you've got no respect for me." Yamato grinned. "Well, what with the presentations tomorrow, we'll see if you can put your money where your mouth is."

Biwa went a little green. That's right! He had to write his treatment!

"Though I suppose that depends on my mastering a little English?"

He couldn't put all that sarcasm behind him. Why couldn't he have been all meek and deferential, tugging at his forelock and begging his leave?

"My, my. That's not a cute look at all!" Yamato chuckled. "But it's a nice feeling. It's strange, you know? I'm supposed to be this bad-ass *seme* type, but you sure have me beat in that department!"

"I'm not!" Was this even the sort of conversation he should be having with somebody he just met?

"Oh, then you're more the *uke*-type?"

"I wouldn't know!" Biwa spun on his heels and headed out the door. "Let's hurry up and get lunch over with. Unlike you, there's a ton of stuff I have to get to after this."

"Fine. Fine."

Biwa's face was red and his heart pounded in his chest. But there was no way he was going to reveal that to Yamato. So he just kept on going straight ahead.

He didn't want to stop and consider the reasons why.

Chapter 3

"In short, this is a starting point that we all agree on."

After a good deal of verbal combat, a detailed description of the character Yamato was to play had been settled upon, along with the specific personalities of the supporting roles. As expected, everybody's first impression of Yamato had been a bad one, and the easily misunderstood aloof cast of his eyes was imparted to his character. Biwa couldn't help harboring a secret grin.

Not working or playing well with others, the protagonist was apt to sally off on his own and get himself into trouble in the process. A constant headache for the Internal Affairs division.

If they could start out making him someone the audience loved to hate, the writers would have done their job. The goal was to gradually win over the viewers while the character was winning over his colleagues.

"We want to wrap up each case in a sixty minute time frame, but scripts should devote half the time to actual crime solving and the other half to character development."

The writers nodded. The producer said to the casting director, "Send a casting call out to all the agents on your list."



"Got it. The focus is on the five principals, right?"

"Yeah. But we won't be holding final auditions until we've settled on a script."

"What about the set design?"

"Depends on the script, as well. We start shooting in two months, so give me your best shot. I'm not going to sit around comparing and contrasting. I'm going with whatever strikes my eye first. The next meeting is in a week. That's all."

Following his final word, a few sighs could be heard hither and yon. A week from now, the pilot script would be chosen. A week to submit a final draft. For a race starting from a dead stop, that was cutting things awfully close. But it was put up or shut up time. Once the series got the green light, things would become a lot more frantic than they were now.

Yamato was sitting next to the producer. Observing that everyone was beginning to file out, he sauntered over to Biwa. "I don't exactly know why, but everybody seems very serious." He gave Biwa a careful look. "And I didn't hear you saying much of anything. What's up?"

"My character designs took things in a completely different direction."

The character occupying Biwa's thoughts was a laid-back guy, always trying to see everything in a positive light, but still screwing up. Not really aware of the walls he threw up around him, but somehow still impossible to hate. A cop in the juvenile division, even the kids he was supposed to be setting on the right track

didn't take him seriously at first. But his sincere and unpretentious attitude eventually turned them into his allies.

A heartwarming family drama. Television police procedurals had all been so deadly serious lately that he felt something a bit lighter was called for.

Of course, Biwa was without allies on this one. He understood that after seeing that montage of Yamato's acting, the darker, more serious approach would hold sway. Still, without even so much as an "Attaboy," the dead silence that followed his pitch suggested that it was time to pack it in as a screenwriter.

"Well, let's see, here—"

Yamato picked up Biwa's treatment and scowled. "It's all in English."

"What did you expect? Who else is going to read it in Japanese?"

"Well, me," Yamato replied, unfazed.

Biwa responded with a startled look. "Are you saying that everything's got to be in Japanese just for your benefit?"

"Okay, okay. I'll read it this way. You don't have to be so snippy about it."

"God, you're so self-centered," Biwa said, not bothering to hide his incredulity. "You didn't even ask me if you could read it, or wait for me to say, 'Sure, go ahead.'"

"Ah. My bad. Would the newbie writer allow the actor for whom the character treatment was composed in the first place to read it?"

"I'm sorry, but no," Biwa said politely, yanking

the sheaf of papers from him. "This didn't exactly constitute a full heart-and-mind effort. Since you said you liked sit-coms, rather than crime dramas, I aimed for something lighter."

"But not anything anybody was asking for."

"No, indeed. Nobody was! I came up with it on my own. So, leading man, go do lunch with the producer or your agent or whoever. The talentless newbie writer with his lead balloon of a character treatment now has to dutifully do as he's told and write the kind of script that everybody wants."

Biwa concluded by casting a glaring look at Yamato. A smile floated to Yamato's lips. *Huh?* Biwa thought. He blows a gasket, and Yamato seems to get some kind of a kick out of it.

"Yep, flying off the handle like that is so like you, Biwa. Cool and collected you're not." He patted Biwa on the shoulder. "Cheer up, eh?"

Perhaps—Biwa gave Yamato a long, hard look. Perhaps he was feeling sorry for him?

"So? What's it about?" Yamato picked up the treatment, but this time Biwa didn't react.

"Thanks," he said in a small voice.

"Aw, it's nothing. I was just thinking that a grumpy Biwa takes all the fun out of teasing him. There's nothing you need to thank me for."

"That's for sure."

He couldn't begin to fathom Yamato's motives, but he was definitely feeling better. So he was thankful.

"Come to mention it, when you talk real fast in English, I can't understand a thing you're saying. I

thought I was picking up a few more things than usual, but I seem to be mistaken. Biwa, how old were you when you came here?"

"Eight."

"And you've been living here ever since?"

"Yeah. I've visited Japan on summer vacations. I've been living here a pretty long time."

"Hmm. I see," Yamato said, pursing his lips.

"By now, I guess you'd consider yourself more of an American than a Japanese."

"Hard to say," Biwa answered with a restrained smile. "My feeling is, six of one, half a dozen of the other. I'm not perfectly at home here or there. It seems as if neither America nor Japan is my true home now. It's complicated."

"Yeah. But, in a way, I think I understand where you're coming from," Yamato said with a small shrug. "When people call me an 'artist,' I want to say, 'I'm different!' Or when asked why I don't just quit acting and lead a 'normal' life, my only answer is that it's impossible. I really can't say I have any friends in the entertainment business."

"Because of your disagreeable personality?" Biwa kidded him.

But Yamato nodded his head morosely. "I suppose that's part of it. Like, it's hard to love this line of work while you're actually doing it, you know? Guys who never formed fast friendships on the way up, and suddenly find themselves surrounded by well-wishers when they hit the top, are going to get a pretty clear picture of what kind of friends they are on the way

down. No matter what anybody else says, at the end of the day, what you feel in your gut tells a different story. That's the sense you're left with."

"Well, that's life, I guess," said Biwa, giving Yamato a sympathetic slap on the back. "The price of fame, eh?"

"Not exactly," Yamato said with a thin smile. "The price of fame is being surrounded out of the blue by friends you never knew—not being able to walk down the street unaccosted by total strangers—having every rumor in the book being spread far and wide on the Internet—that kind of thing. I dare say, for a writer, your vocabulary still needs a bit of beefing up."

Obviously pleased with this comeback, Yamato clenched his fists in a small victory pose.

"Yes, indeed. Well, what then?" Biwa retorted. "The afflictions of fame, say?"

Yamato clucked his tongue. "You certainly can turn a phrase. And that one's certainly on the mark." He sighed. "To be sure, going way back, I've never been one for making friends. Snubbed to my face on the one hand, and used shamelessly on the other. I've had a rough time of it in that department. Once your name's up in lights, you really can't go home again. You'll never know true privacy again. That kind of thing, you know?"

"I suppose so," Biwa said with a nod. Maybe that's why he felt so at ease when he was around Yamato. He didn't really know where he belonged or what to call home. Perhaps here was another kindred spirit who felt the same way?

"So, do you really hate being in the entertainment

business?"

Yamato shook his head. "I don't hate it. But I don't love it, either. Like you, I guess."

"You don't have any friendships you keep out of the limelight?"

"People I really like—who I really care about—maybe there are three left. The kind of people who kept things on an even keel even after I became an actor, who still hang with me the same way they always did. But when you get to be my age, people drift apart, you know? We all have jobs now, and mine makes my life hard to nail down. We probably haven't seen each other for a year now."

"That's sad."

Biwa couldn't say he had a lot of friends, either, but at least he had more than three. Most were his roomies from college. And if one of them became famous, the nature of the relationship would probably change.

"Girlfriend?"

"Nope. The one thing that changed the most when I became famous was losing whatever interest I once had for the opposite sex." Yamato frowned to himself. "It seems that every other girl hitting on me had ulterior motives. It kind of exhausted my romantic aspirations after a while. After seeing so much of their true natures, I guess you could say I lost my appetite for the game. Any thoughts of marriage flew right out the window with it."

"So, what about here?" Biwa said, snapping his fingers. "I didn't know who you were, but I'm sure there

are plenty of Japanese in L.A. who do. In that case, it'd be must more of the same. When it comes to anybody other than Japanese, though, I can promise you that they won't have the slightest idea who you are. It's perfect!"

"When you put it that way, it's a total downer," Yamato's shoulders slumped. "But that really is the truth."

"That's because you're so stuck on yourself." Biwa pursed his lips. "You want to be famous. Except that you don't want to be famous. End result, you're going to spend your whole life alone?"

"And when you put it that way, it's just sad. Yeah, I want to fall in love. I want a girlfriend. But I'm constantly on the defensive."

"That makes America a great place to look, eh?"

"I suppose. Problem is, I can't speak English."

"Well, then let's whack two birds with this one stone!" Biwa nodded in agreement with himself. "If you fall for somebody who only speaks English, you'll have no choice but to speak English with her. The language will become embedded in your head as a matter of course. They say that the one surefire method for learning a foreign language is to fall in love with a person who speaks it. So what kind of bird strikes your fancy, Yamato?"

"Somebody who's cute, strong-willed, and can take a bit of needling."

"Someone who can take a bit of needling? How importantly do you rank that?"

"Like I said before, I've got a bit of Monsieur

Sade in me. If a little tormenting is going to piss her off and put her in a foul mood, well, then that's a no-go. If she understands my way of expressing my affection and forgives me my predilections, but fights back when the fun begins, that would be nice."

"If you're looking for cute girls with a backbone, there are plenty to be found around here."

Raised in a culture where a person who couldn't voice her own opinions didn't rate for much, women in America tended to have a fiercer sense of themselves. This wasn't necessarily the same thing as true strength, but neither was it weakness. As for the rest of his checklist, well, that depended on the person.

"The fact is, I already found somebody who fits the bill," Yamato said with a clever smile.

"No way!" Biwa cried, in a louder voice than he'd intended. "That's great. But you've only been here four days. Where in the world did you run into her?"

"Here."

"Here?" Biwa's voice rose another few decibels.

"I didn't even notice. Who is it? Somebody I know?"

"If you haven't figured it out already, it shouldn't come as a surprise to you now."

"So you mean it's one of the writers? I could play matchmaker, if you like. Or I could be Cyrano to your Christian, and you could make the moves yourself."

"That's okay. That's okay. There really isn't a language barrier here."

"That stinks," Biwa said, deflating a bit. "If she speaks Japanese, then you've got no motivation to keep your nose to the grindstone."

"I really don't think that's the surprising thing about this person." Yamato looked surprised himself. "I can't believe you don't get it."

"Get what?" Biwa stared back at him.

"A real cute countenance, but with enough pluck not to think twice about answering me back with equal measure. Fluent in Japanese and able to take some good-humored abuse. You really have no clue?"

Where is he going with this? Who besides me speaks Japanese around here?

"And it's somebody on the production team."

"Ah—" Biwa finally stood up. He didn't like the direction this conversation was headed. He said, "I've got to start writing my script."

"That's why I was wondering aloud why you hadn't caught on. Don't go running away now."

Yamato grabbed his arm. Biwa's heart thumped. This kind of thing had been happening a lot since he'd been selected for the team. Maybe some sort of stress-induced arrhythmia. If it didn't go away soon, he should get himself an appointment with a cardiologist.

His thoughts sailing off in a different direction, Yamato yanked him back to reality. "So awfully impertinent, but somehow so awfully cute. Hey, what do I need women for? You can't help who you end up falling for."

Biwa wasn't hearing any of this. Not any of it. "So, you want me to set you up?"

As soon as he said *that*, Yamato peered into his face. He averted his eyes just as something soft and warm brushed against his lips.



A kiss.

A sharp intake of breath. Their mouths parted. Biwa touched his own lips in amazement. Yamato freaking *kissed* him!

Everybody knew that this kind of thing went on all the time. The casting couch and all. But as he'd never been the target of anybody's sexual predations, he was caught totally unprepared.

He lost any interest he'd once had for the opposite sex? In other words, he was *gay*?

"Biwa, why don't you and I become lovers? And you could teach me English. In bed, of course."

Sensing another kiss in the offing, Biwa pushed him away. A dejected look came to Yamato's face. "Playing hard to get, are we? We can't have any of that, now, can we?"

"I wasn't playing at anything!" Biwa cried. "I apologize if you took it that way. I definitely don't share those inclinations. Sorry, but you'll have to take it somewhere else."

Yamato's shoulders were shaking. A burble of mirth spilled from his mouth, grower louder and louder, until he was holding his sides and laughing.

"Man, that's funny! You looked like you just stuck your finger in a socket!"

Biwa blinked several times. He was completely at sea. What in the world was going on?

"I was only going to ride you a little, but you were such a darling about it, I couldn't help kissing you. Don't take it so seriously. It's like shaking hands over here, right?"

"Not on the lips!" Biwa's brain finally kicked back into motion. He'd been taken for a ride!

"Oh, is that so? Well, no harm done. Put it down to a learning experience."

"Just what you'd expect from an actor! All those love scenes you've played in must have killed your senses! I don't kiss anybody I'm not in love with!"

"Does that mean you don't like me anymore?"

"That's not the issue!" Biwa raged, turning his back to Yamato. He could kick himself for thinking this guy might have a spark of decency in him.

"Hold on, hold on! It was just a little joke, okay?"

"Shut up! Get away from me!"

"Oh, please! If you dump me, I'll end up like a little lost child."

"Don't be so presumptuous!"

"You'll cast aside your rival and colleague? That's cold, man. A single kiss and you blow your stack like that? That wasn't your first time, was it?"

"No, it wasn't! And that's got nothing to do with this!"

He'd had girlfriends in high school and college. Right now, his job took priority over his love life. Even if he met something, he could hardly give them the time a relationship deserved. So he didn't have a woman in his life. Not that one wouldn't be welcome—or so he wanted to believe.

No, no, no! This was all completely beside the point!

Even before Yamato had kissed him, his heart

had been racing a mile a minute. Definitely because of the stress. It wasn't the stress of being on the production team. It was the stress since Yamato had shown up.

"C'mon, Biwa. Chin up."

"The hell you say! I don't want to have anything to do with scum like you!"

"I said it was a joke! You looked so down, I thought you could use a little consolation."

"I wasn't feeling down!"

"Well, then, name your price. I'll do whatever. Bygones, okay?"

Biwa wheeled around and glared at him. "Like you'd give a damn if I'd finally had it up to here and never talked to you again!"

"But I would. You see, I've never really spoken to somebody like you before."

He had a point there. Biwa couldn't remember the last time he'd talked about the television programs he liked the way they had the day before. It reminded him of being back in college again. He could honestly say he'd enjoyed the conversation. But people who got their rocks off yanking other people's chains left a bad taste in his mouth. Not the kind of person he wanted to be colleagues or rivals with.

Yamato said, "There are lots of things I want you to teach me. Like nailing down the particulars of my character."

He laughed softly. Biwa was bristling. It was all like water off a duck's back to him. Yet, for some reason, observing Yamato's carefree smile, Biwa couldn't help thinking: *Well, whatever.* Worse come to worse, it was a

single kiss. He'd put it out of his mind soon enough.

"As long as there's no second time," Biwa stated. His voice alone communicated the cold resolution of the statement.

Yamato beamed. "Got it. The next time I kiss you, I'll be sure to get permission first."

"That's never going to happen!" *Damn, damn, damn.* Biwa calmed himself down. Overreacting like this was only playing into Yamato's hands. "Tell you what," he said with a smile, "treat me to dinner and I will consider it forgotten."

Biwa mentioned the name of an Italian restaurant, one famous from one side of L.A. to the other. The place was typically booked a month in advance. He smiled to himself. Good luck getting a reservation there. That should muzzle Yamato for a little while longer.

"Deal," Yamato said, and got out his cell phone. "Nemoto-san, please."

Whoa, wait a minute! Getting his agent to arrange things was against the rules! Guys like that always had connections!

"Think you could get me a reservation for tonight?" Yamato queried, mentioning the name of the restaurant.

Several long minutes of silence followed. *Please say no!* Biwa silently begged.

"Ah, I understand. Thanks."

What did he say? There was no way to tell from the tone of Yamato's voice.

"Considering the extra effort it took Nemoto-san to work things out, you must have figured that was

a restaurant I never could have gotten into on my own, eh?" Yamato folded up his phone and smiled brightly.

Biwa was at a loss as to how to respond. *The extra effort.* The words ran laps around his head. Did that mean he'd made the reservation? God, how he hated these big shot agents!

"I take you to be a man of your word. Having made the reservation, I expect you to extend me your pardon."

"Okay. I forgive you," Biwa said reluctantly. He'd anteed up for this wager, and had no choice but to admit he was holding the losing hand.

"Well, then, eight o'clock in front of the restaurant. Formal dress would seem to be required."

That's right! He'd completely forgotten. He rarely ate out, and when he did it was at inexpensive eateries. To be sure, this would be the first time he'd been to a class establishment in L.A.

What to do—?

"You can fill me in on the particulars of today's meeting over dinner. As I'm the one buying, we'll keep the English conversation to a minimum. You'd better square away your script treatment as well."

Biwa didn't need to be told *that*, least of all by *him*! But as per usual, he couldn't come up with a snappy comeback. And he did need to square away his treatment.

"So when you greet somebody, it's on the cheek?"

Biwa nodded, not paying much attention to what he was saying. He had so much on his mind that

his head was ready to burst like a balloon.

"Tonight, then." A peck on the cheek followed. Biwa's eyes went wide with surprise. "I figure that counted as permission." Yamato addressed the other cheek similarly and finished it off with a wink. Then, waving goodbye, he left the building.

His eyes focused on Yamato's back, Biwa regretted that they hadn't gotten off on better terms. Being buddies would be nice. Trying to be pals with a wise-ass, younger actor was doomed from the start. The whole thing was a mistake.

Biwa arrived at the restaurant at seven-thirty. Determined not to be late, he'd left his apartment earlier than was necessary. He was wearing his one and only suit. A sports jacket alone would probably have sufficed, but better safe than sorry.

Five minutes before the appointed time, a taxi arrived and Yamato calmly disembarked. He spotted the overly-tense Biwa and grinned. "What's with that look on your face?"

Biwa said in a small voice, "I've never been to a high-class place like this before."

"It's a first for me too."

"Of course it is!"

Yamato had never been to L.A. before.

"I kind of like the fact that it's a first for both of us. Besides, I'm the one who can't speak English. I'm the one with the tougher row to hoe, right?"

"I don't think that has anything to do with anything."

Yamato was smartly dressed to boot. He wore his suit in a completely different fashion than Biwa did. Yamato's clothing fit him like a glove. The graceful figure he cut had "movie star" written all over it.

"You look quite at home dressed like that."

"Well, back in Japan, I ended up getting taken to places like this all the time." For some reason he frowned. "An actor of a certain class is supposed to have tastes to match. Dining out becomes practically a prerequisite."

"You make it sound like a burden."

"It was mostly traditional Japanese cuisine, served in delicate portions. I got tired of it after a while, you know? Hey, I'm still in my formative years. A couple of Quarter Pounders can really hit the spot, sometimes."

"You're still in your formative years? At your age?" Biwa asked curiously. "Though, I guess I shouldn't pry."

"No problem." Yamato shook his head. "They say your appetite begins to slacken after twenty-five. That means right now, I can pretty much eat as much as like. I'm just saying, it'd be nice to stuff myself to the gills on occasion. Guilt free, for now. Plus, my body is my principal asset and I can't let that asset waste away."

"Huh. Is that so?" Biwa wasn't a big eater. He preferred to sample from a smorgasbord rather than one big plate of meat.

"Pretty much." Yamato shrugged and gave Biwa a shove. "Let's not stand around here gabbing. Let's go inside."

"Um, just a minute," said Biwa, yanking him to a halt. He took a deep breath and looked up at Yamato with an uneasy expression on his face. "Do you think a sports jacket is good enough?"

"It's fine. It looks like something your mom got for the Seven-Five-Three Festival. You look cute in it."

"It does not! And I don't!" Biwa grumbled, "Though I do know I'm cursed with a baby face."

"Indeed. A baby face and a temper like a tomcat. A nice mix, as far as I'm concerned. We're only here to eat food, right? Seeing as that's all it comes down to, there's no sense getting stressed out over your clothes. You'll end up ruining your palate."

"Yeah, you're right," Biwa said, getting a grip on his nerves.

No matter how tony the establishment, the experience of eating ultimately came down to the consumption of food. What more could he ask for than to enjoy a delicious meal in a pleasant atmosphere?

"Thanks. You know, you do look older than me."

"I had the same thought."

This time, the wink Yamato gave him was less annoying than reassuring. Biwa followed Yamato into the restaurant. He had nothing to worry about. A restaurant was a restaurant was a restaurant—right?

Wrong!

Passing through the front lobby, Biwa found himself in a large, luxurious waiting room. The lights of the chandelier glittered on the marble floor. People waiting for their tables lounged on resplendent sofas.

The bar boasted an array of fine liquors the likes of which he had never seen before.

He stood out like a sore thumb. "Hey, Yamato—" *How about we duck out of this joint and hit a fast food restaurant?* he was about to suggest, when Yamato headed straight for the reception booth. The well-seasoned though approachable maître d'hôtel was dressed in a black tux. He said something to Yamato.

Of course! Yamato couldn't speak English! Biwa hustled over to help. The conversation was over before he arrived. A waiter appeared and, with a bright smile, led them into the restaurant.

"Wow!" Biwa exclaimed, despite himself.

The waiting room and the restaurant itself were completely separate from one another. They walked down a long hallway. Here and there along the hallway, they passed a table and chairs, situated like rest areas. Wine racks could be observed through the glass on both sides of the hall. The interior decor of the place communicated the aristocratic air of a Rococo mansion.

"Here we are."

At the end of the hallway, the restaurant itself opened up into a broad and expansive space. The waiting room was quite grand, but this place had it quite handily beat. The chandeliers and the marble floors were all of the highest class. The tables were few in number. A waiter was positioned at each one.

"Um, Yamato—" Biwa whispered. "I'm starting to feel like a fish out of water."

"Not at all."

"But—"

"You'll be fine," Yamato said, giving him a smile.

Observing his beaming face, Biwa thought, *Well, whatever.* Besides, he wasn't alone. Yamato was with him. They were just here to eat. Since he'd obviously never be coming here again, he might as well enjoy himself.

They had been escorted to a table in the back, situated almost to form a room of its own. The black-garbed waiter nodded his head respectfully and asked what they wished to drink.

Biwa relayed that question to Yamato. "I don't imagine you drink," he replied.

"It's not that I don't drink, but I do avoid the hard stuff."

"So the less dry the better?"

"Not a hard and fast rule, but for the most part, yes."

"Understood." To the waiter, Yamato said, "Sherry and a Kir Royal."

"As you wish." The waiter bowed again and left.

Biwa gaped a bit at the adroitness with which Yamato had answered. "Just how well do you speak English?"

"This sort of thing doesn't really count. Food being something that's hard to live without, necessity becomes the mother of invention in listening as well as speaking. It's not a skill that reaches much beyond ordering, though."

"Still, that's pretty good!" Biwa said admiringly.

"I speak English, but I'm at a loss for words in a place like this. Experience really does make a big difference."

"I'm not sure. I think it's more a difference in our passions when it comes to food. This place does look to be pretty good. To be sure, I didn't know about this restaurant, but while I've been served meals that made me hold my nose since coming here, I've yet to encounter any five-star cuisine. I mentioned this to Nemoto-san and he laughed and said I shouldn't get my hopes too high about finding really good food. You think so, too?"

"More or less," Biwa said with a small smile. "Nemoto-san and I appear to be of one mind on this particular subject. Every time I go back to Japan, I'm impressed that the average diner is serving what I want to eat on an average day. Here, it's just being served food that doesn't taste good, but so *much* of it. Like they're trying to torture you."

"That reminds me! I spotted a Japanese beef bowl chain here. I was so surprised, I checked it out."

"Oh yeah. That restaurant chain's in L.A."

A famous beef bowl restaurant chain had locations scattered around the city. Biwa ate there on occasion, as well. The menu was flavored to match the American palate, and tasted a bit off to him.

"I couldn't believe it! Americans really drink Coca-Cola with their beef bowls?"

"Well, they do love their Coke," Biwa said with a sly smile. "But I can't get too upset about stuff like that. Not when you can also get pudding or pastries with a beef bowl special. How's that strike your fancy?"

"It doesn't strike it in the slightest. How can they stand such sweet desserts after a beef bowl?"

"Don't you have the hankering to finish off a meal with something sweet?"

"I was nervous enough just ordering the thing as takeout. Though, I suppose if I'd stayed there, I might have had a Coke to go with it."

"Just to see what it's like? Maybe it does taste good."

"I kid, I kid. There's no way I could offend the beef bowl gods like that. I owe them too much, going back long before my name was up in lights. When I got back to the hotel, I ate it with a beer. That, I'm telling you, is the only way to do justice to a beef bowl!"

"But, of course." Biwa clapped his hands in realization. "You're staying at a hotel."

"Sure. What of it? Where did you think I was holed up?"

"Well, the fact is, I hadn't given any thought to where you were staying. To tell the truth, can't say I cared, either."

"Now, that's not very Japanese of you." Yamato said with a wry smile, "Japanese culture is so much more aesthetically attuned to the diplomatic expression of such sentiments."

"I guess I came here before learning that," Biwa stated matter-of-factly. "Do you find such diplomatic niceties so much more pleasing?"

"Not at all. I get tired of hearing them after a while. That's why you're such a breath of fresh air."

"I apologize for the delay." The waiter arrived at

the table with the aperitifs. "The sherry."

Yamato casually motioned with his hand.

"And the Kir Royal."

The liquid in the champagne flute had a husky, cherry tint. Small bubbles streamed upwards from the bottom of the glass.

"That's pretty," Biwa exclaimed.

Yamato answered with a self-satisfied smile. He raised his glass. "*Kanpai!*" he said.

They clicked their glasses together. Biwa tipped back the champagne flute. The aroma of the black currant liqueur wafted into his nostrils.

"This is quite good." He enjoyed carbonated drinks. He took another gulp. "Brisk and sweet. I've never had it before. What's in it?"

"Nine parts white wine to one part crème de cassis. It's fairly stiff as mixed drinks go, so watch your step."

"Will do." Biwa grinned. "What about the main meal? I don't see any menus."

"Ah, yes. This is a favorite haunt of Nemoto-san, and he says that when you make a reservation, it's left up to the chef to decide what the meal will be."

"Yeah, it's a completely different world." The tone of Biwa's voice was not so much envy or desire, but his impression of the moment. Perhaps grasping this, Yamato didn't contradict him.

"Well, my agent does know how to pull strings. And greasing the right palms doesn't come cheaply."

"However true of Nemoto-san, it's all the more true of you. From the moment you stepped into this

place, you seemed to blend right in. I'm still feeling uptight."

"I was no different at first." Yamato shrugged. "I wasn't even twenty and I was uptight all the time. Had no sense of taste at all. But a person learns the ropes. He grows accustomed" He laughed. "When you become a famous screenwriter, you'll be able to say you patronize restaurants like this on a regular basis. They'll treat you free for the compliment."

"Yeah, if that ever happens—" Biwa tilted his head to one side in an expression of doubt.

"Who knows?" Yamato said with another shrug. "It's certainly never going to happen, if you can't believe in your own talents."

"You sure like saying that. You don't sound very Japanese, either, you know."

"Not the same thing! I may have a sharp tongue at times, but, when the situation calls for it, I can be like oil on troubled waters."

"All right," Biwa challenged him. "Show me."

In a droll voice, Yamato said, "Given your abilities, I believe that you will most surely become a famous screenwriter."

"Oh, please." Biwa drained a good half of the champagne flute in a single gulp. "You can't possibly believe that, but it spills out of your mouth like the God's honest truth."

"Well, I am an actor," Yamato said with an unwavering smile that was all the more irritating. "Sorry. I'll go back to speaking like a normal person."

"Sure. Suit yourself."

Nevertheless, Yamato did eventually resume speaking in an unaffected voice. "By the way, can I ask you about the meeting today?"

"Oh, yes. I should have explained that to you—" Biwa was about to launch into a summary when the waiter arrived with the hors d'oeuvres.

He set the tray down on the table and said, "This is beef carpaccio."

Hors d'oeuvres? For two people? Having lived here for a while, Biwa wasn't surprised by the amount. The reason Americans were so fat was sitting right there in front of him. Give a little thought to the concept of a "reasonable" serving size!

"Hey, this looks delicious! *Itadakimasu!*" Yamato served himself a portion and took a bite and froze there for a second. "It *is!*" At the same time, a small sigh escaped his lips, so taken aback was he by the quality of the cuisine. "Well, I've finally tasted something good in America."

"It's that good?" Biwa pressed, incredulously. He tried some himself. "Wow! Not bad!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Only the best thing here, I guess."

"You ain't kidding. No wonder Nemoto-san is a regular here. If it didn't meet his palate, he wouldn't come back twice."

"It practically melts in your mouth."

"Great. Time to order the wine. How about you?"

"I suppose I can try a little."

Having gone to such great lengths to enjoy such a fine repast, sampling an appropriate wine couldn't hurt.

"Let's leave talk about work till later. We should carry on like normal folks while eating this fine food."

"Agreed!"

Next on the menu came pasta, pizza, then a plate of fish and one of steak, and lastly dessert. Aside from the serving sizes being egregiously large, everything was exceptional.

"Now that hit the spot!"

Having ordered a second bottle of wine, and polished off whatever Biwa hadn't finished, Yamato patted himself on the stomach. "If I had gills, I'd definitely be stuffed to them."

"You literally ate everything on both our plates," Biwa admirably observed. The man had a practically bottomless stomach.

"When we leave here tonight, I'll give you a lift back to your place and walk home. Just the ticket when I've got this much digesting to do."

"Isn't it far?"

Walking back to the hotel would take about an hour, and would take him through some unquestionably unsavory parts of town. It'd be best to avoid going anywhere foot.

Yamato snapped his fingers. "Then let's find somewhere safer to walk it off."

"Sure. We can do that."

Biwa was feeling a bit bloated, as well. If he went to bed like this, he'd definitely still be tasting it tomorrow morning.

"And we didn't talk shop at all."

"I completely forgot!"

"I thought so."

Yamato's reminder sobered Biwa up a little. "Sorry. It is kind of my job."

"Don't sweat it, eh?" Yamato grinned. "You forgot all about work because you were having such a good time hanging out with me. Wouldn't you say?"

That's no excuse! Biwa was about to object, but reconsidered. Maybe Yamato did have a point, he thought. He really had enjoyed himself. There shouldn't be anything wrong being honest about that much.

"Yeah, you have a point."

"What's that? Not the reply I expected." Yamato tipped his head to one side. "A tad tipsy, are we?"

"Not the sort of question a well-mannered Japanese should ask."

The truth, Biwa thought in his heart, was quite the opposite. It wasn't very well-mannered of him, but he didn't feel he should say anything more.

Yamato heaved a big and purposeful sigh.

As they walked along, Biwa explained what had gone on during the production meeting. Yamato dutifully paid attention with the occasional "Huh" or "Oh," and then said he'd like to give the character Biwa had created a shot. Perhaps he was saying so only out of politeness, but Biwa was nevertheless thrilled.

"Even knowing that it won't be selected, I've been thinking of writing a script."

"Do that. I'd like to read it."

"But you don't read English," Biwa kidded him.

"You know, I've heard of these really useful things called dictionaries. I figure I can grasp the gist of things." Yamato added with a mischievous smile, "But if you know it's not going to be chosen, why not write it in Japanese in the first place?"

"I've got to turn in scripts if I want to stay on the team."

"Then what about writing a script based on a completely different treatment?"

"Nothing's etched in stone at this point. If I write the best script, then maybe the premise changes. You'll be the one choosing the role you want to play."

"Point taken. Well, good luck and all." He gave Biwa a reassuring smack on the back that nearly knocked him over.

"Hey, watch it! I'm about ready to toss my cookies here! Be a waste of a good meal."

"You sure turn into a regular Mr. Hyde when you get ticked. You sure it's not because your practically fell on your ass there?"

"Either way, it's going to be a long time before I eat food that delicious and that rich and that expensive again. It'd be a shame to throw it all away."

"You are one interesting guy, Biwa." Yamato grinned. "I've never had anybody like you around me before."

"Hey, it's no big deal." Biwa narrowed his eyes. "Once you bone up on your English a bit and shooting starts, you'll see that guys like me are a dime a dozen. There're tons of classy people around here."

"Undoubtedly. Like a certain producer who happens to see a certain actor in Japan and picks him to be the lead in an American television drama."

"Yeah, that kind of class." Biwa laughed. "And him not knowing this certain actor from Adam."

"You do have a serious attitude problem." Yamato scowled. "But, despite that, he recognized talent when he saw it."

"That he did." Biwa nodded. "I watched those DVDs you gave me. Pretty damned good. You really do have some acting chops."

"You've doubted me all along?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way. It's just that I had to get up early the next day, so I was going to turn it off. But I ended up watching the whole thing all the way through. And the shows themselves were pretty good, too. I take back what I said about Japanese television doing nothing but shitty little dramas."

Yamato gave Biwa a long, hard look. And then he grinned with positive elation.

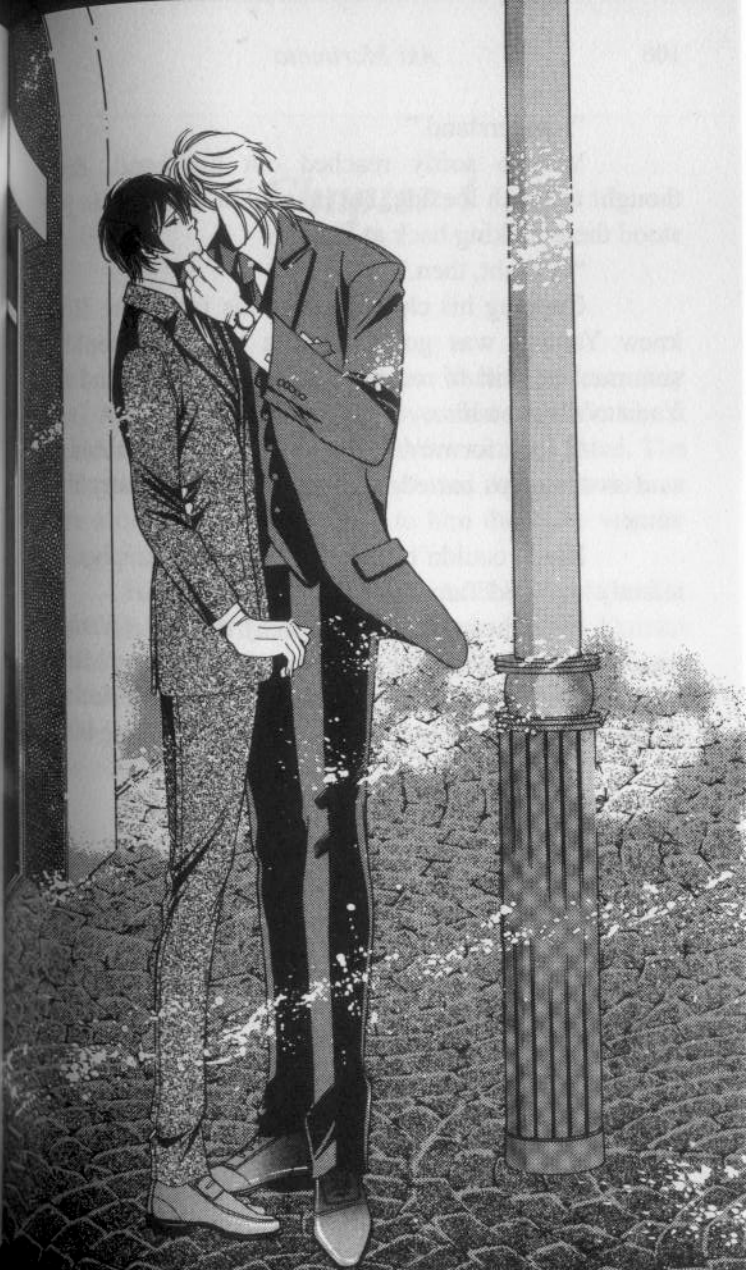
Biwa's heart leapt again in his chest. His pulse thumped in his veins. He quietly steeled his nerves. What was going on with him? Why did his heart suddenly call attention to itself like this?

"Well, I can hail a taxi from here. I guess I'll see you again in a week or so."

"Sure."

Yamato leveled his gaze on Biwa. Biwa wanted to avert his eyes, but couldn't.

"Well, later. You be sure to get yourself a taxi. It's not safe walking around in L.A. at this time of night."



"I understand."

Yamato softly reached out his hand. Biwa thought to brush it aside, but he couldn't move. He just stood there looking back at Yamato.

"G'night, then."

Cupping his chin, drawing his face near. Biwa knew Yamato was going to kiss him, but couldn't summon the will to resist. He closed his eyes and felt Yamato's lips on his.

"I look forward to reading your script," Yamato said as their lips parted, and set off back the way they came.

Biwa couldn't find the words to reply, but silently watched Yamato's retreating back.

Why? he asked himself. Why did he let Yamato kiss him? Why didn't he kick up a fuss about it? Biwa raised his fingers to his lips. It was as if he could feel the warm, lingering traces of Yamato's body touching his.

Chapter 4

What would he say to Yamato when they met? After a week of fretting over that question like a feeble-minded idiot, Yamato was the same as usual. The production meeting having concluded, he greeted Biwa with a raised hand and talked to him the same way he always did.

Biwa didn't ask him why he'd kissed him that night. Maybe he'd been a little drunk. Maybe Yamato didn't even remember. If so, he'd just as soon forget himself. That's probably what the whole thing boiled down to.

"Long time, no see."

"Hasn't been that long. We just haven't rubbed elbows for a while."

Biwa had finished his script for the pilot. Auditions for the additional cast members would commence shortly. Having already been assured the role, Yamato didn't have much to do until shooting started, so he planned to go back to Japan tomorrow.

"Too bad, eh?"

Biwa's script wasn't chosen. He wasn't impressed with the way he'd plotted the storyline, so he wasn't surprised by the outcome, either.

"It wasn't my best work."

"Hmm. Really?" Yamato patted him on the shoulder. "Well, don't let it get you down."

"I'm not. Besides, I hardly have the time."

After this, the writers would be meeting every day. They'd all get together to flesh out the winning script, pitching improvements, plot turns and dialogue changes. The pilot episode really had to hit one out of the park.

"Hey, looks like your presence is being requested." Yamato pointed at the doorway. The meeting was getting underway.

"So, I'll see you when shooting starts. That's still a ways off, though."

Yamato would definitely be treading water for a while. Nevertheless, when it came right down to brass tacks, there was no guarantee they could deliver the best script possible in that time. A pilot episode typically took at least six months to deliver. The producer must have a lot riding on Yamato to expect the same thing in a much shorter time span.

"But not in your case, eh?" said Yamato, reading the expression on Biwa's face. "Well, go get 'em, tiger." He turned to leave.

"Um, Yamato—" Biwa handed him a sheaf of papers. "I wrote it in Japanese as well. You can read it on your flight."

A surprised look crossed Yamato's face. Then he smiled broadly. "Thanks. I'll let you know what I think."

"Either way. Like I said earlier, it could stand a lot of work. So I don't expect that you'll like it much."

"Well that's a dumb way of seeing things," Yamato responded with a grin. "Nobody grows unless confronted by their faults. So I'll gladly take on the role of critic in this case."

"It's intended for your amusement only!"

"Well, I'll let you know about that, too. Biwa—"

Apparently having grown tired of waiting for him, one of the writers came to the doorway and called out to him. "Sorry," Biwa said, and hurried over. Just as well. He didn't want to say "Bye" or "Later" and start asking Yamato "Why?"

So, without glancing back over his shoulder, Biwa ducked into the conference room.

Biwa ended up not speaking with Yamato until shooting began. He always had a translator with him, and Biwa had plenty of things that he had to tend to, himself. As the newbie on the team, he was pretty much at everyone's beck and call.

He was on the set during shooting. So was Yamato, chatting with the director, memorizing his lines, listening attentively to what his translator was telling him. Somehow, Biwa found Yamato-the-actor particularly unapproachable. He could still talk to him during breaks, if he wanted to. The reason he didn't was because he was scared.

Biwa had heard that when shooting commenced, the crew often had the sense that they were working on a quality product, that they had a hit in the making.

He hadn't heard about what happened when the opposite was true.

Yamato and the rest of the cast—pretty much everyone on the set—knew that it was going all wrong. Halfway through, the crew dwindled. The head writer disappeared, probably off to pitch his next project.

It wasn't that anything was particularly *bad*. There was nothing wrong with the script. As requested, a varied and idiosyncratic cast had been assembled. And Yamato's English raised only the occasional eyebrow.

Every component was more than good enough. And yet, the show didn't come together. It simply didn't work. The producer no longer showing up on set was proof enough. It was possible that the pilot would be completed, but no one was getting their hopes up.

And what happens then? Biwa had to wonder, as he watched Yamato rehearsing a scene. He'd go back to Japan, and who knew when he'd ever come back again.

A winning pilot episode meant that he would stay.

But it was all water under the bridge at this point, or so Biwa told himself. They didn't start out knowing they'd screw up. They thrashed things over, holding out to the last minute and polishing the script as best they could. The actors certainly couldn't be faulted in the least.

And yet, despite all that, the thing simply didn't come together. If they knew how and why, they could fix it. Yamato seemed to feel it in his gut, and his mood darkened accordingly.

Which was why Biwa didn't want to talk to him. He'd only end up confirming what they both knew: the show would be canceled before it ever got on the air.

Biwa pretended to be busy with something so he wouldn't have to look at Yamato. In fact, there were tons of things he wanted to talk about. He sighed to himself. They'd wrap up shooting pretty soon. And what lay in store for him then? What would he want to do then?

Biwa didn't have a clue. All he knew was that the sooner it was all over, the better.

"That's a wrap! Thanks everybody!"

The announcement was greeted with a smattering of applause. The final day of shooting had ended. The sound stage was practically empty of staff.

Well, that was the way the cookie crumbled in the television business. No throwing good time, money, and effort after bad. It was one of the things Biwa liked about this business. But now, it seemed a waste.

He couldn't bear the sight of Yamato, his head hanging low, and turned his back to him. Biwa had nothing to say. Yamato would return to Japan and forget all about him. Returning to the frenetic life of a famous actor, having shuffled this episode in his life off to some quiet corner in his mind where it would no longer stab at his conscience.

We'll never meet again, Biwa muttered to himself, trudging down the hallway. He'd never meet Yamato again.

Only here could they talk like normal people. If Biwa ever went back to Japan, Yamato would remain a person from a completely different world. Not somebody with whom he could strike up a casual conversation.

That thought triggered a flood of regrets.

Wouldn't it have been better to maintain a friendly relationship until they had to part ways?

A simple "Goodbye" and a wave of the hand would suffice. The rest was superfluous. He could at least manage that much.

"Is he still here?" Biwa asked himself. Not much time had lapsed since he'd left the sound stage. It might not be too late!

He spun around and saw Yamato headed his way. His heart leapt in his chest. Biwa knew. He knew this wasn't some sort of strange arrhythmia. His heart beat like this whenever he saw Yamato. And the reason was so very simple.

So very simple, but he couldn't bring himself to say it.

"Yo," said Yamato, raising his hand, as if they greeted each other like this every day of the week.

Biwa couldn't help but mimic the same gesture.

"Well, we're through stinking up the set," Yamato said, getting right to the point.

Biwa could only nod in return. "Yeah," he finally managed to say.

"Hard to figure, you know? The script wasn't half bad. The actors were all at the top of their games. But it still stunk."

Yes, *that* was it. Not any of the individual parts, but the sum of the whole. The same way a crappy show was still a crappy show, even when it pulled good ratings. Yamato had probably experienced this sting of defeat many times before.

"It was a nice dream while it lasted," Yamato

said to no one in particular.

Hearing Yamato put his time in America in the past tense, Biwa felt his heart tighten as if in a vice. *It's too early to throw in the towel*, he clumsily wanted to console him, but couldn't find the words.

They'd cranked out an hour of crap. And everybody on the set knew it.

"I'm heading back tomorrow."

"Yeah, we're gonna miss you being around." It was the God's honest truth. Biwa smiled grimly. "Looks like I've lost my rival already."

Yamato seemed to contemplate a snappy reply, but only shrugged his shoulders. *He's given up as well*, Biwa had to conclude. They would definitely never meet again.

"So, give me a ride to the airport tomorrow?"

"Eh?" Biwa gaped at him.

"If it's not too out of your way, that is."

"No, no. No problem at all!" Biwa replied, pushing aside the premonitions lurking at the back of his mind that this might not be the best of ideas. "I've got tomorrow off. I'll come to the hotel to get you. What time does your flight leave?"

"A little past noon."

"I'll drop by around nine."

"Thanks," Yamato said, a glint coming to his eyes. "Tomorrow, then."

He waved and walked away. Come to think about it, Yamato's back was about the only thing he'd been seeing these days. Biwa leaned back against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. It'd be tough

seeing Yamato off, but Biwa still wanted to see him one last time. He wanted to watch Yamato sail off into the sunset himself.

"I really am an idiot." Biwa smiled awkwardly to himself. "An utter and total fool."

And he hurried off to the john. He felt himself on the verge of tears and didn't want anyone else to see.

Biwa arrived at the hotel at nine o'clock. Yamato was waiting for him in the lobby. All he had with him was a small backpack. He must have sent his luggage ahead. Spotting Biwa, Yamato waved him over.

"Wow. The interior here is something." Biwa took in his surroundings with wide eyes. All he'd known about this place before was the name of the hotel.

"I went to such great pains to reserve myself a room here," Yamato quipped derisively. "And I never really got to use it."

Biwa couldn't think of a comeback. He'd be lying to him if he disagreed, and insulting him if he agreed. He probably shouldn't have showed up at all.

As soon as the regrets started to mount, Yamato shrugged and said, "I guess I can't help but keep on dragging out the final scene, but I think it was worth it just to breathe the air here."

He looked straight ahead, as if to shake the dust from his feet. *That's backbone*, Biwa thought to himself. He'd probably end up in a funk for a month.

"Even if my foray into Hollywood was a bust, I've got a ton of work waiting for me in Japan."

"You still don't know that for certain," Biwa

declared in a clear voice. "Things might not have paid off this time around, but other offers are sure to come your way later, right?"

"No," Yamato flatly stated.

"But—"

"The word from Nemoto-san is that the producer made it clear that this was a one-off. What with the airfare and the hotel bill, not to mention the production costs, they're already in the hole up to their eyebrows. That last part he couldn't tell whether the guy was joking or dead serious. Harsh, but that's business."

An agent's livelihood depended on his actors getting on base every time they came to bat. Yamato not getting picked up for that pilot lowered his chances all the way around. Close to zero, in fact. It wasn't just budgets that ran into the red. So did reputations. Biwa didn't know what to say to him.

"Don't give me that hangdog look." Yamato patted him on the head. "Chalk it up to experience. Besides, I haven't given up hope yet." He grinned crookedly. "Yeah, walk onto the stage to too much fanfare and you'll never rise to the expectations. For now, I've got plenty on my plate back in Japan. Someday, though, I'll be back here for real. I'll work the auditions and earn myself a role on American television the old-fashioned way."

Biwa smiled. "That's a good plan."

Yet at the same time he knew that, while every actor promised to make a comeback someday, few of them were ever heard from again. He could be pretty damned certain that—

Biwa shut the words that followed out of his mind. Maybe Yamato would come back someday. If Yamato loved American television that much, after enough years had passed, Biwa would probably see him on the screen. And Biwa would stop by the set to see him. *Hey, how's it going?* he'd say.

No, that was likely to remain a dream. And most dreams never came true. But he could still think about it, couldn't he? He didn't want to think about them never seeing each other again.

"Well, we'd better get to the airport," said Biwa.

Yamato glanced around the hotel lobby. He bowed once, deeply, and then turned and walked out the doors. There was a grace in the way he walked that was almost beautiful.

As was Yamato himself.

The freeway to the airport was one long traffic jam. Getting to the airport through this mess could prove problematic.

"How are we on time?"

It was past ten-thirty and the airport was still a ways off. Yamato got out his ticket. "Departure time is twelve-forty. Looks like we'll be cutting it close."

For all the obvious reasons in the news lately, Biwa knew that getting through security was going to be a royal pain.

"What airline?"

"JAL."

"That's way the heck at the other end of the

airport." There wouldn't be enough time to park the car and make it there on time. "I don't think me seeing you off is going to work. I'll drop you off in front of the terminal, okay?"

"With all this congestion, I guess we don't have a choice." Sitting in the passenger's seat, Yamato heaved a sigh. "I was hoping we could share a coffee after I checked in."

"Yeah, that's not going to work. Just finding a parking space will be a nightmare."

They finally arrived at the airport, but the stop-and-go traffic was moving through the arrival lanes like cold sludge. The International Terminal was still practically over the horizon.

"You don't think maybe walking would be faster?" Yamato asked, glancing at his watch.

Biwa shook his head. "It's not exactly walking distance. About another mile from here. It's still faster by car."

"Oh. Well, whatever. We may still make it under the wire." Yamato took a deep breath and let it out. He reached into his backpack and took out a folded slip of paper and placed it on the dashboard.

"You're giving me a tip?" Biwa quipped.

Yamato smiled. "Not the kind of tip I would give a rival."

So Yamato still considered him worthy enough to be deemed a rival. That alone was enough to set his heart aflutter. He wanted Yamato to stay and make it in American television. Then they could really consider themselves "rivals."

"Then what?"

"My address and phone number in Japan. Next time you're over there, give me a ring."

Biwa gave Yamato a surprised look. Yamato winked back at him. "You did a good job showing me the ropes around here. What's up and coming—what's a must-see—I'd like to stay in the loop about those kinds of things."

"Yeah. Sure."

I'll chuck it when I get home, Biwa thought to himself as he took the slip of paper. If he held onto it, sooner or later he'd give in and call Yamato. But he'd just be a bother. The only reason Yamato was hanging out with him was because he was in L.A. Once he got back to Japan and resumed his daily routine, he'd forget all about his misadventures in America.

He'd gone through the whole routine countless times before. "Call me," they'd promise, parting in tears. A flurry of phone calls back and forth for a while. Three months later, the calls would taper off. Six months later, they would forget all about each other. And hooking up the next time Biwa was in Japan? Yeah, it'd never happen.

Yamato would be no different. So he'd throw it away. And even if he didn't, it was a lost cause from the start.

"The other request I'd like to make might seem a bit unreasonable to you." Yamato's expression grew serious. "If the pilot gets shot down, give me a call, okay?"

Not understanding his meaning at all, Biwa shot

him a puzzled look. If it gets shot down? *Doesn't he mean if it gets picked up?*

"Of course Nemoto-san will call me with any good news. But he's not likely to be so eager if the news is bad."

"I can't see him hanging you out to dry like that." His agent should call him in any case. Still, the bad news was bound to come around the same time he was putting it all out of his mind.

"I want to know as soon as the decision is made," Yamato said, fixing Biwa with his gaze. "Even I know the odds are against it. Still, as long as there's a breath of hope left, all that waiting is a pain. I know this is all about my own ego, so you needn't feel obligated."

"I'd think bad news would be worse than the waiting."

"Even though it would seem to be a losing proposition from the start?" Yamato smiled cynically. "I like to stay in touch with reality. If the news is bad, I can face it, assess it, and move on. I've got no problem dealing calmly with my own failings. It's dragging things out that I can't stand. That's why." He said with an even expression, "If you're so inclined, I truly won't mind. Call me."

"Sure. I get it."

So he would be holding on to that slip of paper. Biwa got out his wallet and tucked it inside. The one place he wouldn't likely lose track of it. "I'll let you know as soon as we hear back from the networks."

"Thanks," said Yamato, squeezing his hand in return.

Biwa's heart jumped. There was no denying it, he thought to himself. He really did like him. At first, he'd pictured Yamato as the prince of jerks. The only thing on his mind was how much the guy pissed him off. After that, they'd shared a few intimate conversations. And yet at some point Biwa had fallen for him, and hard.

That's why the failure of the pilot episode was so difficult to take. It was better they nip things in the bud, so that they didn't become more intimate. So that Biwa didn't fall any further in love.

But that was impossible.

Even though Yamato was going back to Japan. Even though he'd likely never come back again.

He'd still fallen in love with him.

Biwa gently let go of Yamato's hand. He didn't want to feel that warmth. Something he could never have. Not knowing it would make it easier to abandon.

The International Terminal at last came into view. Yamato let out a sigh.

"Looks like we made it in time."

"Though there's not much time to spare. You'd best make a run for it." Biwa wanted to see him off with a smile. This was it. They'd never meet again. He wanted to bid Yamato goodbye before he dissolved into tears. Even if their paths never crossed again, he wanted them to go on being colleagues and rivals.

All would be forgotten before long. This infatuation, as well. So the sooner he was left alone, the better.

Biwa wanted Yamato to leave without a

backward glance, the same way he had left the hotel.

"Well that's that, I guess," Yamato said.

Biwa was on the verge of breathing a sigh of relief. But he held it back and smiled brightly instead. "Good luck."

"Yeah."

"I'm looking forward to your next series."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Later." Biwa hesitated a bit, and then added, "It was fun."

The pilot probably wouldn't get picked up. He'd blown his chance to make a name for himself as a screenwriter, and Yamato's opportunity to make it in Hollywood had flown the coop.

So these were probably not the choicest of words. But it really had been fun—taking part in making a television show—meeting Yamato—and working together for even a short time.

He'd count it all as experience under his belt.

"Yeah, it was," Yamato agreed with a nod. The cloudless smile on his face suggested he shared a similar sentiment. "Well, I'm off."

Yamato undid the seatbelt and went to open the door. But then he stopped and turned back.

"What—?" Biwa started to say. The rest of the sentence never left his mouth. His mouth obstructed, he could only blink his eyes. *What in the world?*

Yamato softly tasted his upper lip. Biwa's mouth opened as if of its own accord. He closed his eyes as Yamato's tongue slipped between his teeth. Biwa knew he should push him away, but his arms were wrapped

around Yamato's back. Yamato penetrated his mouth, their tongues entwining, and Biwa responded in kind.

The kiss went on and on. A car horn blared behind them. At last their mouths separated.

"Remember how I liked someone who was cute but tough, and could take a bit of teasing with a sense of humor?" Yamato smiled. "I really meant it. The next time I'm in L.A., I'm making you mine." Biwa only bit his lip and stared back at him. Yamato said, "You can count on it."

I feel the same way. But if he said that, what would Yamato do next? Would the plane leave without him? Would he stay here permanently? That wasn't possible. So he didn't say anything. He'd take those words to his grave.

After another kiss, Yamato got out of the car. Like always, he walked away without a word, eyes straight ahead.

Not wanting to watch him leave, Biwa averted his gaze. Urged on by the honking horns, he drove away, his vision gradually growing blurrier.

He hadn't wanted to know that Yamato really loved him. He'd wanted to believe this was a one-way affair. His heart throbbed painfully. He'd be gone from Biwa's life after this. And wouldn't return again.

"Why—?"

Why wouldn't the tears stop? Biwa pulled over to the side of the road. He rested his head against the steering wheel. Why make *those* their last words? Why couldn't they simply leave the memory of each other behind? When Yamato got back to Japan, he would



surely forget all about Biwa. Along with any feelings of affection he might once have had.

That was the way these long-distance relationships always worked out. The emotions always surrendered to the distance and separation. Biwa knew that he wasn't strong enough to surmount it. No matter how strong the desire to be together, no one could hold out forever.

He'd be better off ridding himself of these emotions. Putting Yamato out of his heart and mind. He'd update him about the fate of the pilot, and that would be the end.

His heart still ached. *Was there still enough time?* The thought flitted through his mind. Enough time to run after him, grab him, and tell him that Biwa loved him, too?

But how would that change anything? Biwa took a deep breath and started up the engine. *It wouldn't change anything.* They might be lovers for a short while, but it wouldn't last long.

Some things were better left unsaid. Some feelings were better kept to oneself. Time healed all wounds. Someday, somewhere, they would meet again. The day would come when they'd laugh and say to each other, "Remember back then?"

That way was better. That way was the best.

The tears dried. Like Yamato, Biwa looked straight ahead, and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

The pilot episode was completed a month later.

And a month after that, word came down that it hadn't been picked up. Biwa wasn't surprised.

But he'd done a lot of thinking during those two months. About the pilot, about the qualities of the character Yamato had played. And about his own script. And Biwa resolved not to call him.

Yamato would definitely be waiting for the call.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I said I'd call right away. That was a lie after all, wasn't it?"

But if he called and heard Yamato's voice, his resolve would crumble. And so he dithered.

"What's up?" Biwa spoke aloud the words he'd been practicing in his head. "How's it going? You busy? What's Japan like these days?" All he felt in his hand was the cold plastic casing of the telephone. He hung his head. "I want to see you," he blurted out.

Though he knew that they would never meet, Biwa still couldn't help wanting to see him with all his heart.

Chapter 5

"Man, I'm beat!"

Biwa collapsed on his bed. The fall television season had begun, and every day was a workout from dawn to dusk. Running around all day doing odd jobs was fine for the time being, but was this what he really wanted to do for the rest of his life? That was a question he didn't know how to answer.

He wanted to work in the business "above the line." That was his dream. But the chances didn't look good for him in that department.

"Maybe I should quit, get myself an agent, and go out on my own."

He could sell scripts and treatments to anyone willing to buy them. And say goodbye to any promise of a steady income, too. Not to mention that—

The phone rang on the nightstand. Probably someone from the studio, barking for him to get over there right this minute. A phone call in the middle of the night was never good news.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's been six months. Maybe longer."

The voice he least expected to hear was on the other end of the line. Biwa froze like a statue, the phone glued to his hand.

"Hey, Biwa, you there?"

What was he calling him now for? Some favor he wanted to beg of him? And yet he hadn't called at the one time when it really counted. The time he'd all but crossed his heart and hoped to die for.

Biwa choked down all those emotions and found his voice, speaking with a tad too much manufactured elation. "Well, this is a surprise!" He laughed so that Yamato was sure to hear. "How's it going? What's up?"

"Oh, this, that, and the other. So what's with not once dropping me a line?"

"Oh, you know, I've been really busy, and all."

He didn't point out that Yamato hadn't bothered to call him, either. The real reason was that he'd just given up. He'd given up on a lot of things. He'd had plenty of time to accept the world the way it was. So he'd stopped hoping for anything. He could even keep an even keel hearing Yamato's voice.

"I see. Same here. Despite all the phone calls, seems the opportunity never presented itself."

Yamato appeared to be seeing things his way. Except that something else caught his attention. *Despite all the phone calls?* What phone calls? To whom?

"I'm going to be in your neck of the woods starting tomorrow."

"What!?" Biwa exclaimed in a louder voice than intended. He quickly clamped his mouth shut. He'd do himself no good, showing all his emotional cards from the start. It was over between them. Over and done with. "Oh, I see. Something to do with your work or whatnot?"

If Yamato said, *Hey, if I find the time, let's get together*, he'd say it was fine with him. He'd just never pick up when Yamato was in town. There was no way Yamato would go so far as to interrupt him at work.

They'd never "find the time," and that would be that.

Yamato said, "Not at all. What are you talking about?" He sniffed to himself in exasperation. "That script you sent over."

Biwa's hand closed around the telephone receiver like a vice. He bit down hard on his lower lip. Yamato should have forgotten all about that. *It's no big deal*, he told himself over and over, trying to still his racing heart.

Was he still a lost cause? Was he still not over Yamato?

After Yamato had returned to Japan, Biwa had suddenly gotten it into his head to write a sit-com. The lead would be a Japanese man who'd just arrived and could hardly speak a word of English. A duck-out-of-water story about a normal guy making a go of it in America. The show would take place in his apartment, at a local budget restaurant, and at the Oriental food market where he worked part-time.

The show would be about people not getting each other. It wasn't hard to come up with funny and interesting faux pas arising out of the protagonist's rudimentary grasp of English. It was the kind of story he'd wanted to write all along.

Biwa had cranked the whole thing out on his days off, revised it a dozen times, and then sent it to

Yamato. In both Japanese and English. There'd be no way to tell the best jokes without the English. And without the Japanese, Yamato would have a hard time getting through it.

He'd only attached a single personal note to the manuscript: *If you like it, give me a call*, along with his phone number.

I wonder if it reached him, he had optimistically ruminated the first week. When no phone call came after a month, he figured the script hadn't struck Yamato's fancy. When two and then three months passed, he decided to forget about it.

He didn't have what it took to be a writer. Yamato wasn't going to call. The two of them wouldn't be collaborating together in the television business.

And then, just as his life seemed to be finally getting back to normal, it came flying out of the blue back at him.

"Oh. Oh, yeah. That. I forgot all about it."

Should he speak in a perfectly normal tone of voice? Act like he didn't care? Listen like it was no big deal?

"What?" Yamato exclaimed. "You forgot? You must be joking."

He really wished he was joking. He hurt all over. "Hey, Yamato. I appreciate you calling me after all this time, but it's the middle of the night here. I gotta go to work tomorrow."

"What are you talking about? You're not making any sense." Yamato's voice grew sharper. "What are you doing, still working at that company? You haven't quit?"

"Quit? Quit what?" Now, he wasn't getting what Yamato was saying at all. "Are you okay?"

"I left a message on your answering machine, but you seem to be ignoring it."

"Answering machine?" He left a message—"Ah!" Biwa yelled. "My answering machine!"

"Hey, watch the yelling," Yamato said in a sour voice "My ears are ringing."

Biwa hardly noticed. "Yamato, you didn't leave a message on my answering machine—?"

"I gave you a call right after I read your script. I haven't heard a word from you. I, perhaps rashly, concluded that, since you sent me the script, you wanted to do the project with me. All this running around arranging a trip to the U.S. appears to be for naught." He added icily, "And you forgot all about it."

"Um— No— I—" Biwa grasped for a reasonable explanation. What should he say? His brains turned to mush. The words wouldn't come. *Your neck of the woods starting tomorrow*. He finally grasped what Yamato was talking about.

"My answering machine is broken!"

Since he had a cell phone, Biwa had figured it didn't matter if the answering machine worked or not. Had Yamato been leaving messages on it all along?

Why the hell hadn't he bothered to fix it? Because of the time difference, it wasn't likely Yamato would ever call him when he was home. Yamato was busy too, and he wouldn't be likely to be free when he was around.

He definitely should have included his cell

phone number when he sent Yamato the treatment.

The regrets piled up one after another. What if he hadn't sat around sulking, believing that Yamato hadn't been happy with what he'd written? What if he'd just called to say hello? They could have cleared up this misunderstanding from the start.

"Hello?" came Yamato's puzzled voice on the other end of the line. "Broken?"

"Yeah." Biwa could see his expression in his mind's eye. "After the beep, the automated voice comes on, but nothing happens after that. You didn't call back repeatedly, did you?"

"Not constantly, but—" Yamato said in a small voice. He didn't seem to have fully grasped the context of what had happened. "So you haven't heard my proposal yet?"

"No, I haven't. In fact, I thought you were avoiding calling me, so I figured you didn't like it."

"Huh. Well—" Finally figuring out what was going on, Yamato cleared his throat. "Then, how shall we proceed?"

"Good question," Biwa laughed, despite himself. The better question was what Yamato wanted to do.

"As soon as I read your script, I thought to myself: *This one's a winner!* As far as my own schedule goes, I've tied up all my loose ends here. It took about six months. Along the way, I've boned up a bit on my English."

"Though dramatically, the story works better if your English isn't so good."

What was he doing? Was this for real? Was he dreaming? Yamato wanted to play the lead in his screenplay?

"I got my plane ticket. I haven't arranged for any accommodations. I was thinking I could crash at your place."

Biwa couldn't believe his ears. He was on top of the world. Yamato had liked his script! *What do I do now?* He was on the verge of weeping for joy.

"Sure. You can stay as long as you like."

"It'll be hard to get things rolling with you still working your day job."

"I'll quit tomorrow," Biwa declared.

Even if the show didn't sell, he could live with that. This was the kind of role he wanted to write for Yamato. That's why he wrote the script in the first place. The kind of sit-com they both loved. And if this one didn't make it, he'd start all over from scratch. Yamato said he'd tied up all his loose ends. That must mean he wasn't taking on any new projects in Japan.

"While I'm waiting for you to arrive, there are some things I've got to get ready."

"I'll be there in a day." The tone of Yamato's voice returned to normal. "We've got to book a sound stage, right?"

"Yeah, but first the script needs a good working over. I'll need your help there, as well."

"It's fine, it's fine," Yamato said peevishly.

"I don't want to come over there and just sit around twiddling my thumbs."

"You're not going to be sitting around all day!"

Biwa cried. "The entire production team's going to be you and me, right? We've got to rent a sound stage, and the cameras and grips and the director, and then there's the casting. Tons of stuff to do."

"But I thought you would just take care of everything. All I'd have to do is show up."

"Oh, give me a break." Biwa laughed. "I produced a show by myself when I was in college. It was a lot of fun. I was the director, screenwriter, cinematographer, art director. I even took the lead role. All you've done is act, right?"

Yamato snorted. "A screenwriter with no notches in his belt shouldn't talk. Don't look down your nose at the famous actor."

"I'm not looking down my nose at anybody. I know that, without you, there'd be nothing for us to shoot. Still, putting together a television series from scratch is no simple task. But it'll be a blast anyway. Don't you want to see how it all unfolds?"

"You're darned tootin'!" Yamato practically shouted. "Damn. And my plane doesn't leave for a whole day!"

"Speaking of which—" Biwa felt compelled to ask, "Yamato, didn't you have any misgivings about this?"

"About what?"

"You hadn't gotten hold of me, and yet you went and booked a flight here. Weren't you a bit nervous?"

If Biwa had been in his shoes, there's no way he could have done it. He wouldn't have started making plans until *after* he'd made contact.

"Not at all," Yamato answered breezily. "After all, you wrote that script for me, right?"

"Yeah."

"So you were determined to wait for me to come around, right?"

Biwa burst out laughing. With that kind of positive mental attitude, Yamato wouldn't have any problem making it in America.

"Right?"

"Undoubtedly," Biwa giggled. "I was waiting for you to come around."

He really had been waiting all along. Morning, noon, and night, Biwa been waiting for Yamato's call. He had been lying when he told himself he'd given up. There was no way he could put it all behind him. If Yamato hadn't called him today, then he would have waited for another day. And another.

"That's why I went ahead and bought the ticket. No other reason."

"Thanks. I mean it." Biwa was truly thankful from the bottom of his heart. Thankful that Yamato had liked the script. Thankful that he'd "tied up all his loose ends" and was coming to America.

Thankful that Yamato had chosen to believe in his talents when he wasn't sure about them himself.

"You remember what I told you at the airport?"

"Yeah, I remember." *The next time I'm in L.A., I'm making you mine*, Yamato had told him.

"You can count on it."

"You know, Yamato, there's something you need to know as well." Biwa smiled playfully to himself.

"I love you, too. The first time we met, I'm afraid to say that you totally turned me off. But at some point—"

"What a little fool you are!" Yamato said with a sigh. "How is that something I don't know? I've known it since day one."

"Eh?" Biwa blinked, his eyelids practically fluttering. "W-why?"

"Your entire body was crying out that you loved me. I wasn't about to waste my breath on what would likely prove an unproductive profession of love."

The image of Yamato's cocky countenance rose up in his thoughts. He wanted to see him. The sooner the better. "I want to see you," he said aloud. He wanted to see him *this instance*.

"And I'm telling you, it doesn't do us any good to talk about such things now! I want to see you, too. But the plane isn't leaving until tomorrow, and won't get into L.A. until the day after tomorrow. That's just the way things are."

"I really want to be with you. I want to see your face."

"Oh, enough already."

"Yamato? Don't you want to see me?"

"I already told you! We can't do anything about it at this point! So, quit talking about it!"

"But we haven't seen each other for over six months!"

"I'm going to hang up."

"Don't say that. I want to hear your voice."

"Man, calling you was a mistake, after all. I should have just shown up on your doorstep. What a

pain you can be!"

"But you still love me?" Biwa teased. In his heart, he pleaded, *Tell me that you love me*. The same way he had half a year before. Just one word, enough to set his heart at ease.

"Of course I love you, you idiot," Yamato replied in an irritated voice. "You think I go around kissing people I don't like? You're trying my patience. I'm hanging up."

"W-wait!"

"That's it!" Yamato wailed. "I'm not listening. Whatever you have to say can wait a couple of days. I'll be all ears then."

"Just one last thing—"

There were tons of things he wanted to talk about. Tons of things he wanted to do. But for now—

"A kiss before you go?"

Yamato seemed to grasp what Biwa was saying. The sound of a kiss came over the wires, and then the line went dead.

"I love you," Biwa whispered, as if to communicate the words and feelings to the personal on the other wide of the world. He repeated the words over and over.

"I love you. I want to see you."

The plane was scheduled to arrive at eleven o'clock in the morning. Biwa sat in the arrival lounge, fidgeting restlessly, standing up, walking around, and sitting back down again. The plane had landed, according to the flight information monitors, but he

couldn't see any Japanese-looking passengers coming down the ramp.

"What's going on?"

A number of planes had arrived around the same time, and the customs and immigration area was probably packed. Or perhaps some other problem had arisen. Maybe Yamato had missed the flight. What would he do if he didn't show up?

All those anxieties disappeared the moment he saw Yamato. He wanted to run to him, but couldn't move. Yamato glanced around. Their eyes met, and he raised his hand.

"Yo." A regular greeting, like they hadn't been apart at all. Just like Yamato, Biwa thought, a smile rising to his lips. "No climactic reunion?" he said, drawing closer.

Biwa could only nod in reply.

"How about a hug?"

"I—can't—" Biwa said, finally finding the words. "I think it was such a relief seeing your face that all the strength went out of my body."

He'd hardly slept for the last two days. Perhaps it was all catching up with him now.

"Well, then I guess I'll have to do the hugging for both of us." Yamato smiled and gently reached out his arms.

Falling into his embrace, Biwa felt the tears spilling from his eyes. *This is the one*, he thought as he clung tightly to him; the one person he'd spent his entire life searching for.

"I so wanted to see you," was the only thing

he could say. All he felt was the warmth of Yamato's body against his. His body forever within the warmth of Yamato's arms.

"It sure ain't the Taj Mahal," Yamato quipped when they arrived at Biwa's apartment.

Biwa shot him a look. "Well, I'm not rich, unlike some people we both know. A man's got to live within his means."

When it came to sharing a flat, a few more square feet sure would help. But Biwa had had his share of roommates during his college years, and concluded that sharing his life with strangers wasn't exactly up his alley. Besides, he'd always lived alone. He'd been cooped up in this one-room apartment for the past five years.

"In that case, the first thing you're going to do once you get rich is move. A little luxury's not too much to ask for."

"Except that it won't do much good asking for it now."

Make yourself comfortable, Biwa was about to say, when Yamato threw himself onto the bed. "Ah, smells just like you."

"Um—" Biwa forgot what he was going to say. What was Yamato up to, saying such embarrassing things?

"C'mon. Hurry on over here," Yamato said, patting the mattress.

Biwa meekly did as he was told. Somehow, Yamato seemed to understand how exhausted he was.

He lay down next to Yamato and narrowed his eyes. "Yamato—" He reached out and touched his cheek. "You're really here."

"What are you saying such adorable things for?"

Yamato's face drew nearer. Biwa shut his eyes. And waited. The touch of Yamato's lips after such a long time filled him with joy. His eyes closed as if in a trance, and he took Yamato's tongue into his mouth. As their tongues intertwined, Yamato shifted his position, pushing Biwa down onto the bed and climbing on top of him. Biwa circled his hands around Yamato's neck.

Their mouths parted, and Yamato's lips trailed down his neck, his hands working at the buttons of Biwa's shirt.

W-wait a minute! What was he up to?

"Y-Yamato?"

"Hmm?"

He'd undone three buttons. Although it was fall, the days were still comfortably warm, and Biwa wasn't wearing a T-shirt. Bare skin lay underneath.

"I can change into my pajamas by myself."

"Why would you want to change into your pajamas? Why go to all that trouble after getting you undressed?"

He didn't mean—? "Sleep together?" As in *doing* it? He'd thought he was fussing over him because he was so beat. But apparently not—

"Isn't this America?"

"Yeah, but—" What did that have to do with anything?

"So hasn't the time has come to make you mine?"



But he was tired. And wouldn't it be better to take things a bit more slowly? And he wasn't really in the mood—Biwa knew that he should say all those things, but instead he nodded bashfully. "Okay."

Yamato grinned, and undid the rest of the buttons.

"Ahh—that—tickles—" Biwa arched his back as Yamato sucked on his nipples.

"Feel good, doesn't it?" murmured Yamato, rolling the buds around with his tongue. That alone was enough to send spasms shooting through Biwa's body.

"Not—just—there—"

Yamato devoted all of his attention to Biwa's nipples, by now ripe and red and hard between his fingers.

"Then where shall I touch you?" He slowly released his grip and ran his fingers all the way up Biwa's limbs, spreading his legs apart. "How about the place where I enter you?" Yamato said, touching his hidden flower.

Biwa knew how guys did it together. And he'd prepared himself since he knew Yamato was coming. But when Yamato touched him there, his body stiffened.

"You're hard here," said Yamato, stroking the aperture. "But that's not the only thing that is." And he gently grasped that part of Biwa jutting towards the ceiling. A low moan spilled from Biwa's mouth. "Ah, I sense things opening up."

"Don't say such things—"

It was mortifying. Having everything about

him exposed to Yamato's eyes like this was mortifying in the extreme. But at the same time it was extremely satisfying. Being bedded by Yamato. That thought alone made his heart leap in his chest.

Yamato licked his finger and pressed it against Biwa's bud. Nuzzling his body he pressed it inside. A glancing moment of pain, of discomfort, that disappeared as Yamato stroked his body.

"Will I fit inside such a tight space?" Yamato furrowed his brows. "I'm afraid I might damage something."

"It's—it's okay." Biwa smiled. "You can do anything you want."

"This is no joking matter." He scowled. "I can't enjoy myself at your expense. That's not fair." He extracted his finger.

Biwa took a deep breath. "It won't be just me. You'll feel my pain as well." He wrapped his arms around Yamato and clung to him tightly. "Still, you can fit inside me, right?"

"It will sting." Yamato smiled grimly. "The both of us hurting isn't a good thing."

"Shall we stop, then?" asked Biwa, peering up at him. "Start over with a clean slate?"

"Nonsense." Yamato snarled, and kissed him. "This luscious treat right before my eyes, and I'm not going to taste it? It's always going to hurt a little the first time. But it gets much more pleasurable as time goes on."

"Yes, yes," Biwa nodded. "Let's take it nice and easy."

"I'll give that a pass." Yamato pressed his finger against Biwa's bud. "The harder the workout, the faster the sensation comes. Making love to the person you love should be a pleasurable experience, right?"

"Of course."

"Making love to you should be, too."

"Then go ahead and do me." Making Yamato happy was good enough for Biwa. The way he felt right now, making Yamato the happiest man in the world was reward enough.

"So, hang in there."

"I think that's something I'm supposed to say."

"Yes, but I'm starting to feel better already."

Yamato's finger delved inside of him. "I can tell you're becoming softer than before. Once you loosen up a bit, I'll be okay."

"You do that. I hate guys who only care about how they feel."

Though it stung as much as it had before.

"Do you hate me?"

"I love you, of course."

"As long as you love me, then nothing else in this world matters."

Biwa felt his chest burn. *I love you. I love you. I love you.* He loved Yamato from the bottom of his heart.

"You've gotten a bit more tender. This is doable."

He plunged his finger deeper inside. Biwa raised a small cry. "Y-Yamato. That hurts—"

"Hold on—"

"You brute." Biwa shot Yamato a look. "Why are you—you're hurting me—like that—"

Yamato searched deeper and deeper inside of him. Biwa arched his back. "M-more s-slowly—"

"That's impossible. You're too precious." Yamato began quivering his finger. Something seemed to groan and grind inside of him. "Unbelievable. I would have never have thought your writhing body would be so arousing—"

"Bastard—"

His inner wall of muscle tightened around the digit, as if to expel the roaming finger inside him. Biwa stifled a small scream. He wouldn't give Yamato the pleasure.

Yamato added another finger, and the pressure increased. As did the pain.

"Um, Yamato—"

Yamato's fingers alone were this trying, and yet Biwa couldn't stop thinking about being fully penetrated. Looking up at Yamato towering over him, he lost his courage. "Let's just leave it at—" His words dissolved into a long, drawn-out moan. "*Ahhh*—" His head bobbed back and forth as Yamato buried his two fingers inside him.

"Let's not leave it at that." Yamato answered shortly, withdrawing his fingers. "Sorry. But it seems I can't hold out any longer."

Yamato pressed himself against him, his full, large length hiking up his hips as if of their own accord. "Biwa—" he whispered gently. "I love you."

Biwa looked back at him with surprised eyes. *I*

love you? Really? Not just some crazy infatuation?

"Whenever I'm apart from you, I can't stop thinking about you. So let's do it together."

"Yes." Tears trickled from the corners of his eyes. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

Yamato plunged into Biwa, in that place where the tension had all but left his body.

"Ahhh—"

Pain like nothing before elevated Biwa's body off the mattress. Yamato pushed back in turn, penetrating him deeper and deeper.

"It hurts—it hurts—"

"I'm sorry."

Foreheads touching, eyelids, cheeks, and then lips. Tender kisses descended upon him. Biwa shook his head back and forth. "D-don't apologize," he said, kissing Yamato. "The pleasure is equal to the pain."

Indeed, the moment Yamato entered him, happiness was all he felt. Despite the pain. Despite how much more pain was to come. He could take it, take it all. Just knowing that Yamato was inside him was enough.

"I—I love you," he said, for the first time imparting the full meaning of the words. Words that melted into the air in clouds of bliss.

He loved him, loved him with all his heart. From now until forever.

Thank you, Yamato whispered, beginning to rock his hips back and forth.

There was pain. And there was pleasure. That's the kind of lovemaking it was.

"Ahhh—" Biwa's body arched like a bow.



Yamato smiled slyly. "I thought it would take more time than this. Seems you've accustomed yourself awfully fast."

The second time Yamato penetrated him became pleasurable much quicker. Perhaps because he was already wet inside or perhaps because Yamato had already limbered him up. Either way. Burying his whole length inside him, the permeating pain was absent. Far from it—

"Ahhh—"

Even he could hear the cloying sweetness in his cries that must have registered with Yamato as well.

"Ah, I feel you twitching."

Yamato shifted his body, rubbing his shaft against the inner wall of Biwa's flesh. Biwa's body trembled and spasmed. When Yamato reached for his nipples, Biwa cried out shrilly, "N-not there."

"Not there? That's not what you're telling me inside."

Yamato withdrew slightly and thrust in again. With every movement, the pain diminished slightly, a very different sensation spreading through his body.

"Ahhh—No—Why—"

He shouldn't have started feeling so good so soon. But his body was on fire. He was burning up. How and why, he couldn't understand.

"What's that?" asked Yamato with a teasing look. "What do you mean, why?"

Biwa tossed his head back and forth and bit down on his lip. He wasn't going to say anything.

"My, but you are a stubborn one. That only

makes me want to torment you more."

Yamato slowly began oscillating his hips, rubbing himself against that sensitive part of Biwa that he'd just revealed.

"Ahhh—I!" Biwa's lips parted, letting the rapturous sighs escape. He hurriedly covered his mouth with his hands.

"The more you feel the better, no?" Yamato grinned. "It's me, right?" He grasped Biwa's hands and pulled them away from his mouth. "I'm the one making love to you, right? Show me that face of yours."

Yamato kissed him, and Biwa responded. It felt good. Not just the kiss, but everything.

"Show me the happy face of a man being loved by his favorite person."

He didn't shrink from calling himself Biwa's "favorite person." Even if he said it, as he always did, in that wry tone of voice of his, that was fine with him.

Biwa wrapped his arms around Yamato's back. "Do me," he said in a hoarse whisper. "It feels so much better than before. So, do me."

"And if I do, will you pant, just the way you feel?"

"Of course," Biwa smiled. "My body is burning up."

"What a bad, bad boy you are."

With a sudden, lurching heave of his hips, Yamato shoved himself inside Biwa, caressing all those sensitive place inside him.

Biwa yelped. "Easy! Easy!"

Yamato's eyes shrewdly narrowed. "Then say you love me."

"I love you! I love you!" Biwa frankly declared. But it was the truth. With every fiber of his being.

"I love you, too," Yamato said, kissing him. He began moving in a more measured manner, accompanied by the wet sound of flesh kneading against flesh.

"Ahh— Yes— Biwa moaned, his hips rising to join with Yamato's, more fires kindling in his body with every move Yamato made. "That feels good—"

Biwa could no longer hide his pleasure. As Yamato rose and swayed atop him, his cries continued to climb.

"Nothing's guaranteed after this," Biwa whispered, ensconced in Yamato's arms.

Though feeling drowsy, there were still things he wanted to say to Yamato. He was still somehow in the mood to talk.

Yamato stroked his hair and laughed. "What are you talking about? I don't get you at all. Quit your jabbering."

"But you put your career on hold to come to America, with only an outside chance of actually making it big."

"I know that," Yamato said, looking Biwa in the eyes. "But I love sit-coms."

"I do, too." Biwa rubbed lazily at his eyes.

Yamato patted him on the back. "It's okay. You take a nap. We'll talk about it when you wake up."

"No." Biwa shook his head. "I'm afraid this all might turn out to be a dream." He pressed his body hard against Yamato's. "I'll wake up and it'll turn out your

were never here."

"But I am here," Yamato laughed. "You need only listed to your own body. If I wasn't here, you'd know it *down there*."

"I wouldn't." Biwa averted his eyes.

Yamato seized him by the chin. "You body still throbs, doesn't it? Because I've been inside you?"

"I can't say that for certain."

"But I am here," Yamato said with a gentle smile. "When you wake up, I'll be here. Sleep in peace. We'll talk shop after that."

"I'm on top of the world, you know?" Biwa whispered.

"What's that?"

"You liked my script, and you came to America like this, and you made love to me like this. Everything is perfect."

"Same for me." Yamato kissed him hard. "I couldn't be any happier that you wrote that script for me, that you were so happy when you met me, and that I could make love to you. So, let's just sleep."

"But the best thing in the whole world—" Biwa voice dropped off to a silent whisper. "—is making a television series with Yamato."

And he fell asleep, and further thoughts would not disturb his slumber. Except that he imagined he heard Yamato saying softly, "Me, too."

Biwa opened his eyes and blinked. He groaned and stretched. He hadn't felt this refreshed waking up in a long time.

He started to climb out of bed. A part of him that shouldn't have throbbed painfully. *What's going on down there?* he thought.

A second later everything came back to him. Biwa cast his eyes around the room.

Yamato was sleeping there beside him.

"Yamato—"

A smile rose to his lips. It wasn't a dream. Yamato really had quit his work in Japan and come to America to make a sit-com with him. "Thank you," he said, stroking the cheek of the soundly-sleeping Yamato. The cheek of his business partner and lover.

"I love you," he added, and kissed him. Yamato grunted and rolled over. "Hey, hurry and wake up," he whispered, plastering himself against Yamato's body. "Wake up and say my name."

He planted kisses all over Yamato's naked body. "And then, let's do it again."

The next time it would surely be all pleasure and no pain.

"I'm getting lonely here, you know."

Biwa buried his face against Yamato's back and drank in his scent. Emotions filled his heart. *He really was here.* The person he truly loved. The person who loved him. He really was here.

Yamato's body twitched and he slowly roused himself. His eyes gradually opened. The moment their eyes met, Yamato smiled.

That alone was enough to make Biwa's heart swell with elation.

"So, it wasn't a dream, right?"



"Right."

"I'm still here, right?"

"Right."

Biwa continued to gaze at Yamato. The only thought upon his mind was how much he loved him, loved him, *loved him*.

"The moment I opened my eyes, that's what I thought, too: *Ah, Biwa is really here. I'm really in America.*"

"I am, and you are."

Biwa reached out and touched Yamato's warm cheek. The most important person in his life was right there beside him. Within reach. Yamato placed his hand over Biwa's, and held it against his cheek, as if it belonged there.

The kiss of a hand against hand, lips pressing against lips. But that was enough. Yesterday was not a dream. This touch of the flesh confirmed it.

"You know, Biwa," Yamato said playfully, as their lips parted, "that men do tend to get a bit hard first thing in the morning."

"That does tend to happen."

"It'd be a shame not to put that tendency to good use, don't you think?"

"And if I didn't think so, do you think that'd stop you?"

"Of course not."

"So is there any need to ask, then?"

Yamato shrugged in reply. "The witness is directed to answer the question. Is this, or isn't this, a situation to be taken advantage of?"

"Better that it doesn't hurt, of course." Biwa wrapped his arms around Yamato's neck.

"Indeed. Better that it doesn't—"

"Then let's—" Biwa smiled. "To tell the truth, I want to do it, too."

"Yeah, I know," Yamato replied with a wink. "I know everything about you already."

Biwa didn't quite believe that, but he didn't contradict Yamato. The statement, in fact, made him happy. And besides, being understood like that was something worth hoping for.

So, without another word, he closed his eyes.

And soon Yamato's kisses rained down upon him.

"Action!"

At the sound of the director's voice, shooting began. A pilot they were producing on a shoestring budget with no guarantee of success.

But the moment Yamato opened his mouth to deliver his lines, all of his concerns flew out the window. There was no doubt that they had a winner on their hands. They were going to be okay. This show would find an audience.

Biwa glanced down at the script. A smile rose naturally to his lips as he pondered the happiness that had arisen when the person he loved and the job he loved at last joined hands together.

Fate herself was an ill-tempered goddess, never revealing the object of desire except in the clash of

opposites, as walls to be scaled and overcome. With a mutual understanding achieved, only then would she finally smile upon the pair, turning hate against itself and revealing there love, instead.

For he loved him, he loved him, he loved him. *I truly love you.*



Afterword

It's been a long time since I've gotten together with you followers of Prism Paperbacks. Hello, there. I'm glad to get to know you. Aki Morimoto, at your service.

Well, then. This time I've written a story about the American television business. American television series sure are something, aren't they? Once upon a time, I really didn't care for series television, foreign or domestic. But people kept telling me how great these shows were, so I finally caved in and watched 24.

I've been engrossed in American television ever since. In the novel, I mention a number of sit-coms without revealing the titles. If you got them all, then I consider us fast friends.

No, seriously.

This is the kind of subject I'll sit down and talk my head off about with anybody. But my friends all say they don't have the time. I tell them, "Just shut up and watch!"

"But it takes too long!" they complain.

Point taken. Watching a single season of twenty-four episodes all the way through will, by simple calculation, takes twelve hours for a half-hour sit-com

or twenty-four hours for a one-hour drama. How in the world can I keep on watching them day in and day out?

Three cheers for more free time! (Okay, yes, now's hardly the time to get defiant on that subject!) And it's not like I don't have a job to tend to. Is it? Well, now and then (now and then?), I buckle down and get to work. So what, exactly, am I talking about? The ruthlessly efficient use of my leisure time?

Well, no. Not really. The reality of the situation has reduced me to a pitiful wreck. Let's get off the subject for now, shall we?

There's just one more thing I've got to get off my chest. Isn't Warrick on *CSI* simply adorable? I'm sending out a call to all those who agree with me (I expect there to be zillions)!

And, speaking of *CSI*, this last summer I went on vacation to Los Angeles (Having claimed not too long before that I'd done it for the last time!). I even traveled to Las Vegas by car. And was that ever a trial!

According to the way Americans calculate speed limits and travel times, they'll tell you it's no problem. "It's not that far." Don't believe them. You'll end up speeding through the empty desert at seventy-five miles-per-hour—

For five hours!

These gigantic tractor trailers hauling who knows what racing along right next to me, not only matching my speed, but leaving me in the dust! And everybody rocketing along at these absurd velocities—

With their windows open!

My dear readers, try this on your own and see

what it's like (thanks for the suggestion, but that's just too weird). Open the windows of a car going seventy-five miles per hour and take in those endless fields of clover.

Uh, no.

To start with, I could barely keep my eyes open. Then my ears started ringing. After five minutes, I'd reached my limit. I'd toyed with the idea of touring America in a convertible, but my friends in L.A. told me that was stupid and convinced me to give up the idea.

I am deeply grateful to them for the advice. Renting a convertible would have been pouring money down the drain

It all seems like a dream to me, now (*That's* the punch line to this story?). Yeah, sorry.

As usual, I've spent most of the afterword not talking about the novel. But I've pretty much spent myself at this point (I know, I know. That's *so* unlike me).

And now, it's the customary time to express my thanks to all those involved. The illustrations were done by Yutta Narumi, a first time for me. I was pleased as punch to see her gorgeous drawings, and that was just the rough drafts! If the opportunity presents itself, I hope to make use of her talents again.

My editor, Matsumoto-san, has been a great help to me every step of the way. I truly hope that, after this, our professional relationship won't go by the wayside.

I should see you all in the spring of next year. The next time you spot my name on the cover of a book, pick it up and take a look. Until then!